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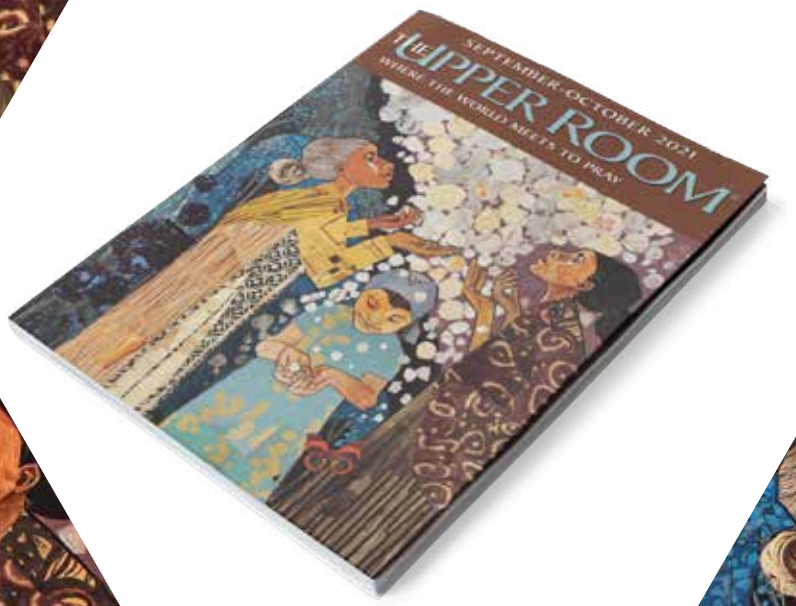
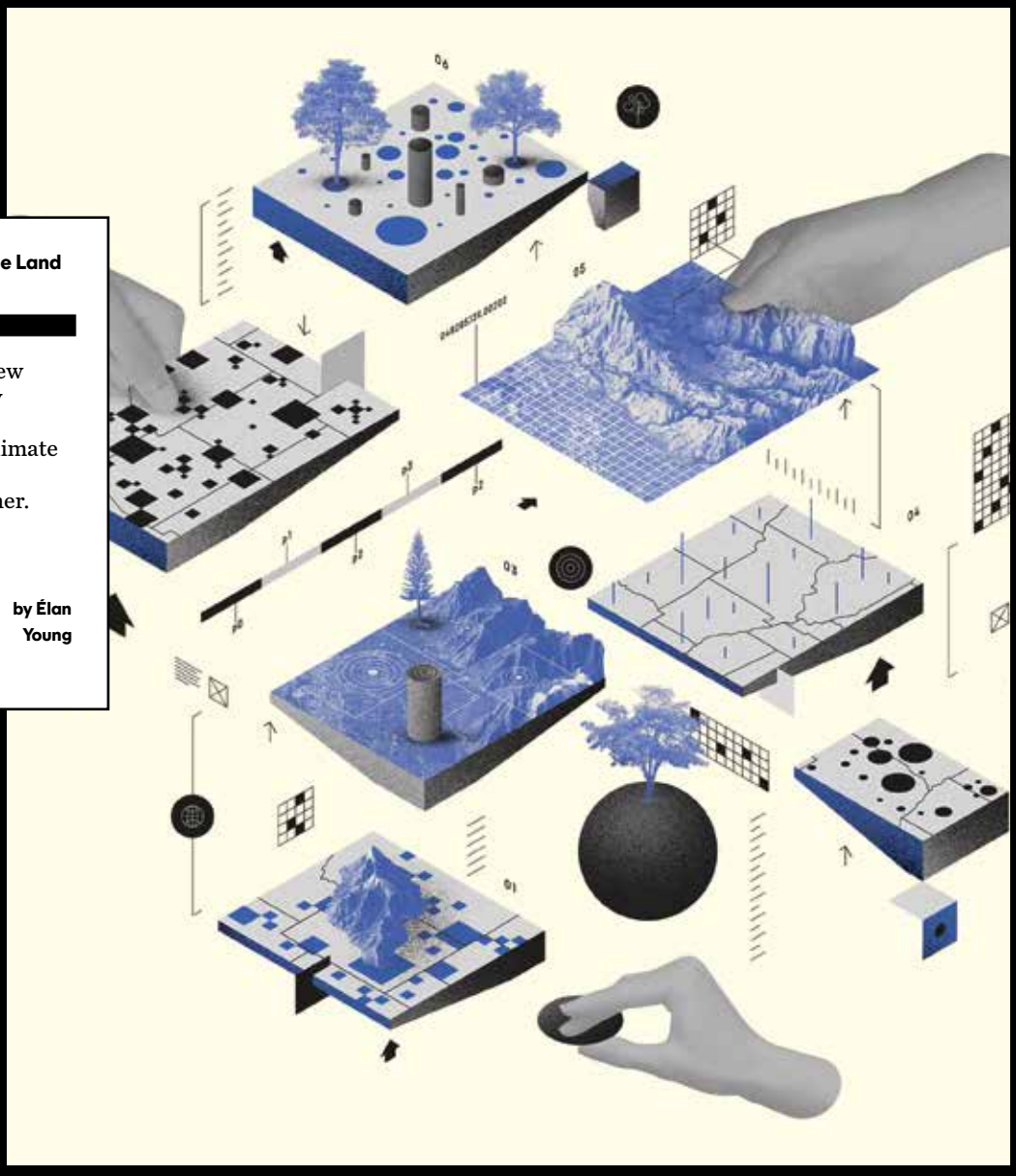


"BEHIND CLIMATE RESILIENCE THERE MUST BE FOUNDATIONAL DATA."



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From the Editor

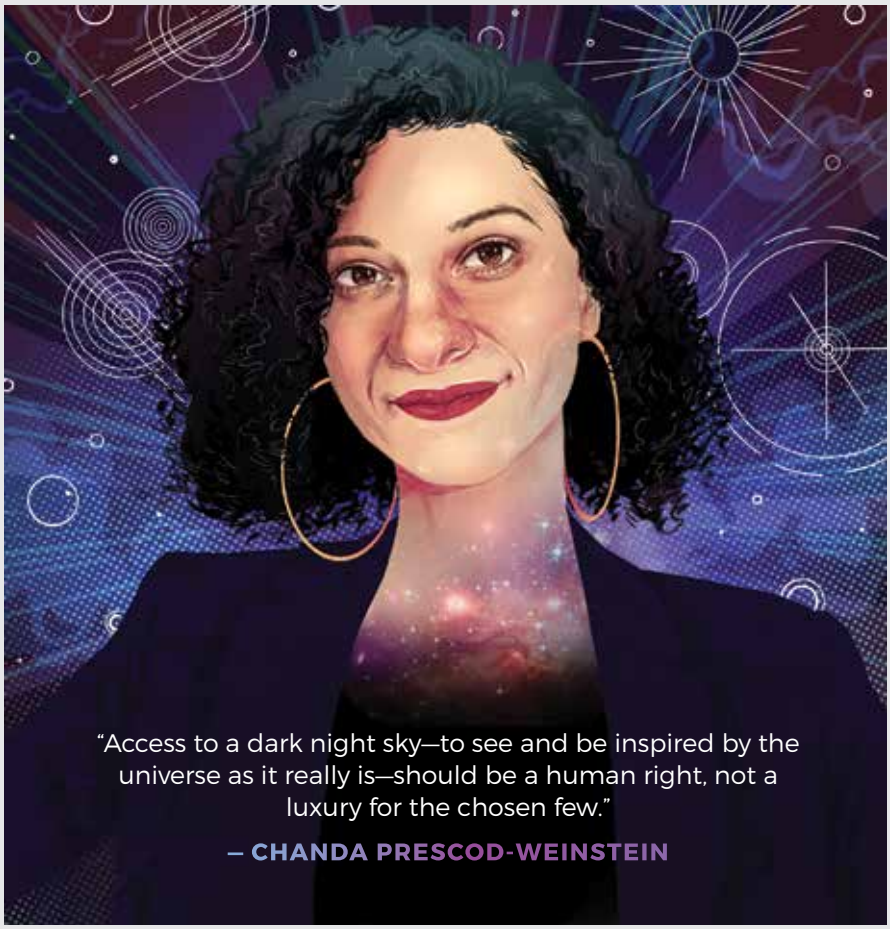
Jeania Ree V. Moore, a *Sojourners* columnist since 2019 who's working on her doctorate at Yale, explains why she thinks Cole Arthur Riley's @BlackLiturgies, featured in this issue, is so important, especially now: "At a time when social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic precluded most forms of Christian liturgy and threatened to make permanent the temporary church closures," Moore writes, "Riley traversed the digital divide and rerouted traditional channels for spiritual expression." She continues, "Basically, I think it's really incredible that, at this time when liturgy is literally inaccessible for many for the foreseeable future… @BlackLiturgies is this super liturgical, vitalizing, Black space that appears on the scene. And liturgy breathes and lives and people are engaging it and finding food for their souls in it."

We're grateful to Moore for the many ways her own writing has fed our souls and inspired our imaginations over the past few years, and we wish her the best as she takes a break from column writing to focus on her graduate studies.

RESPONSE

Hurray for a Groundbreaking Bishop!
In September, Rev. Dr. Megan Rohrer became the first openly transgender person to be installed as a bishop in a mainline Christian denomination. Rohrer was featured in the November 2021 issue of *Sojourners* in an illustration by Abigail Giuseppe. "Hurray for those who are going to find some peace through a groundbreaking bishop and role model," Valerie Kilpatrick [Instagram] wrote in response. "Beautiful illustration! Giving thanks for Bishop Rohrer's ministry!" Olivia Whitener added [Instagram]. Helen Harlan [Instagram] asked, "How do we watch their sermons?" To learn more about Rohrer, revrohrer.com is a good place to start.

Write us: response@sojo.net



Theoretical physicist, feminist theorist, and author of *The Disordered Cosmos* Dr. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein
Illustration by Hazel P Mason

"THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE DARK-EST VALLEY, I WILL FEAR NO LOVE."

Jamila Woods
Singer, songwriter, and poet

CONTRIBUTING

Francesca de Gasparis
"The knowledge of faith mirrors what we know in science," says Francesca de Gasparis (p. 12), executive director of the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI). Inspired by her work with the Green Belt Movement and Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai, de Gasparis and SAFCEI partner with local communities and faith leaders from "a place of shared ownership" to bring about change. "By caring for humanity, you must also care for the earth," she says.

Emmalyn Pure
Combining documentary photography and curated editorial photoshoots, photographer Emmalyn Pure (cover, p. 22) seeks "to tell stories" with her images—"conveying beauty in all forms." Pure, based in Ithaca, N.Y., says her passion for the craft was sparked while studying abroad in Ghana at age 22 and now "feels like an extension" of herself. "The complete freedom I have to continuously experiment and redefine myself through my craft fuels me in a way that nothing else does," she says.

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Percentage of our solar system's mass comprised by the sun

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1.3 million

The number of Earths that could fit into the sun

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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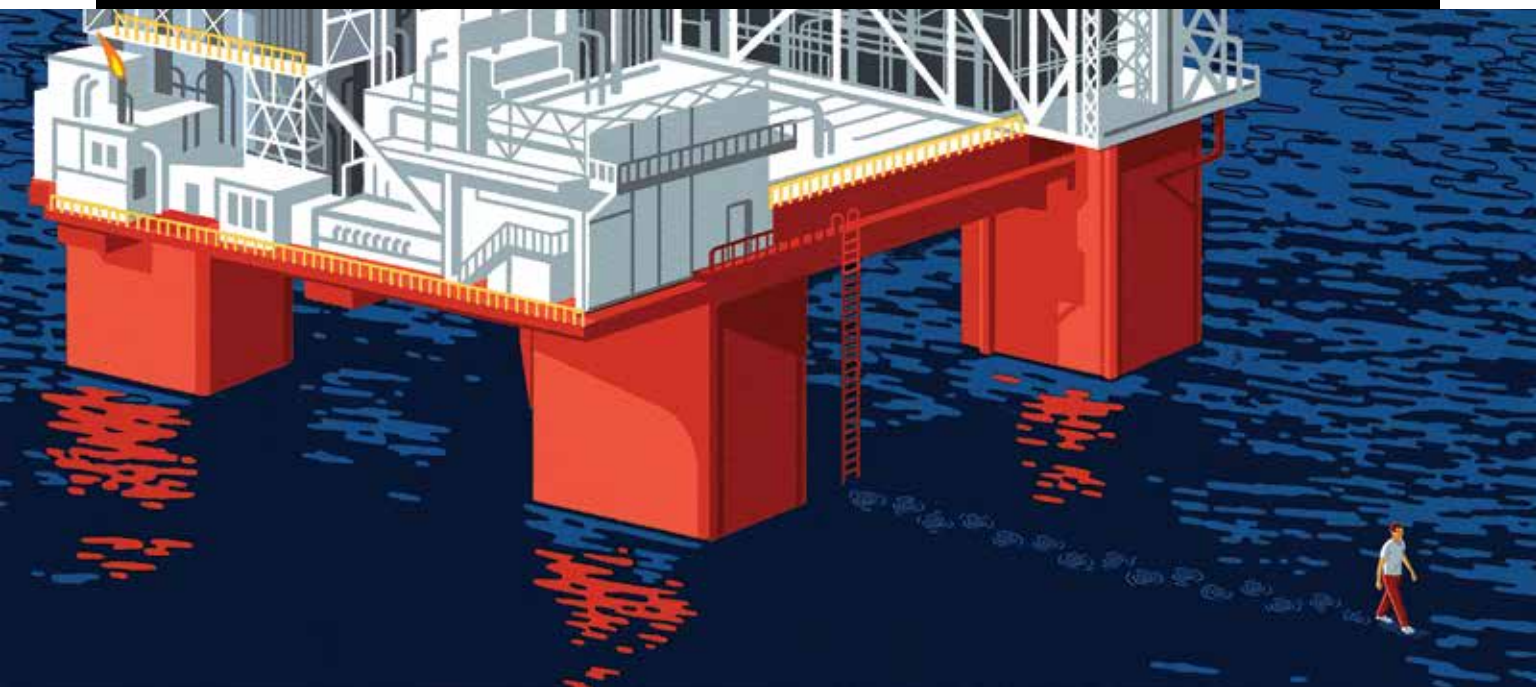

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GRAIN OF SALT BY JIM RICE

TAKE THE PLEDGE

For many of us, this summer felt like a cosmic wake-up call about climate change. Fire, floods, hurricanes, and other cataclysmic signs of our rapidly heating planet seemed to offer near-apocalyptic warnings that we're approaching a make-or-break point, especially for those already vulnerable because of poverty or geographic location. We almost didn't need the scientists—such as those who produced the dire U.N. report in August—to once again sound the alarm, as they have done so many times over the past several decades, nature already having done the job in her impossible-to-ignore fashion.

Anger seems an apt response to global warming, given that the world's climate crisis isn't an unavoidable act of nature; rather, it's rooted in intentional actions by people seeking power and wealth. The

* * *

EXXONMOBIL "SPENT MILLIONS TO PROMOTE MISINFORMATION" AND MANIPULATE PUBLIC OPINION.

Illustration by Pete Ryan

"WILL THIS MOVE US AWAY FROM FOSSIL FUEL USE OR TOWARD IT?"

main perpetrators—including ExxonMobil and its GOP enablers—knew about the causes of climate change more than four decades ago and, as *Scientific American* put it, "spent millions to promote misinformation" and manipulate public opinion. Some might call such duplicity "crimes against humanity" and "indictable behavior."

Given the immensity of the challenge before us, and the severity of the threat, it's not surprising that Christians are among those asking (if, for some, belatedly): "What can I do?" Individuals, congregations, denominations—church bodies at all levels—are joining, and sometimes even leading, their secular counterparts in seeking out things they can do that can make a difference. One such action is "the pledge"—a promise to ask the question, as part of *every single decision* that is made, and before *every action*: Will this take us toward, or move us away from, the use of fossil fuel? The climate pledge echoes a commitment made by some U.S. Catholic bishops in the 1980s to predicate every decision with the question, "How will this affect those who are poor?" Now, with the Earth itself in peril, we must apply the spirit of that commitment to protecting all of humanity.

That doesn't mean, of course, that we turn away from the many intersecting issues of our time, from battling racism, police violence, and militarism to seeking justice for people who immigrate, who are poor, or who are otherwise marginalized. All these "issues"—all these people—are threatened by climate change, and often more so because of their already vulnerable status. Our task, even as we continue our work on all issues, is to ask that a priori first question: Will this move us away from fossil fuel use or toward it? That question can and should be applied to decisions large and small: from choosing to bike to work on a drizzly winter morn to divesting from the fossil fuel industry, from the type of car I drive and the way I vote to whether a city or state builds a new road or invests in alternative transportation. Every decision.

Obviously, the pledge is mostly a matter of consciousness, of in-the-moment awareness of the accumulated consequences of our actions—especially, of course, the actions of corporations and governments. And just as obviously, efforts like this will continue to be opposed by those who have made enormous profits from fossil fuels. But until that question becomes as natural as breathing, our fate is very literally in the balance. ⊗

Jim Rice is editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

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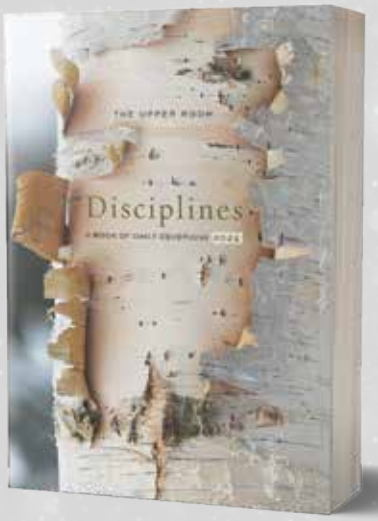

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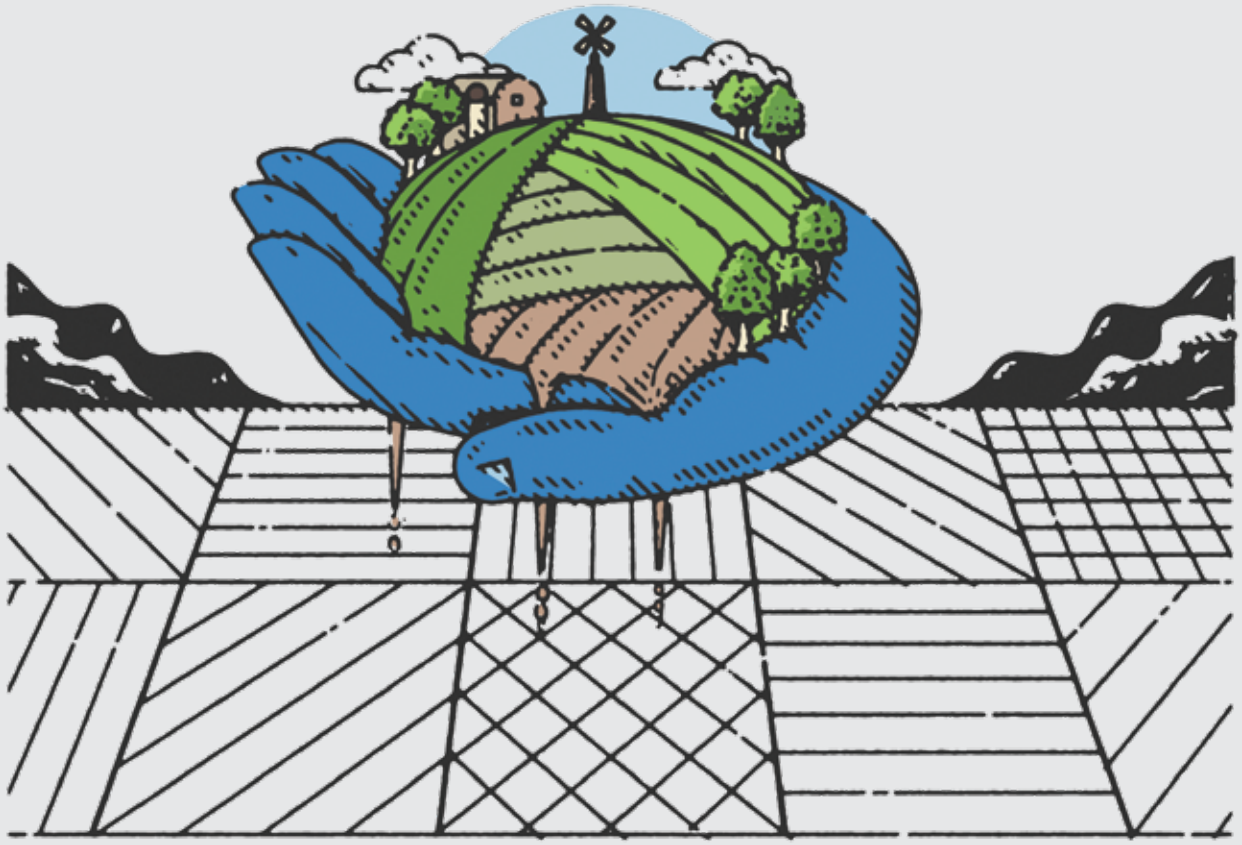
COMMENTARY

BY FRANCESCA DE GASPARIS AND GABRIEL MANYANGADZE

SOWING GOOD SEED IN FERTILE SOIL

African faith and farming communities take on the Gates Foundation's failed "green revolution."



The COVID-19 crisis has intensified food insecurity and hunger globally and exposed the failings of a profit-driven, industrialized agriculture and food system.

In August, an alliance of more than 500 African faith leaders and smallholder farmers delivered a strong message to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation: "The Gates Foundation's support for the expansion of intensive industrial scale agriculture is deepening the humanitarian crisis."

Faith communities and farmers want the Gates Foundation to stop funding the so-called "green revolution technologies" through the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). African faith leaders are witnessing the negative impact of industrialized farming to the land and the well-being of their communities. They are calling for a shift to sustainable and agroecological farming that works in local contexts for people and does not harm the land.

AGRA was founded in 2006. Since then, the alliance has received about $1 billion

Illustration by Michael George Haddad

in donations—two-thirds came from the Gates Foundation, according to Timothy Wise, senior adviser at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. African governments, driven by AGRA's influence, have created tariff agreements and tax incentives that subsidize large agribusiness and worsen the crisis.

For the past 15 years, AGRA has restructured seed laws to favor a limited range of genetically modified "certified seeds" owned by corporations, which require inorganic fertilizers, must be repurchased for every planting, and force monocropping. Coercing communities to embrace industrial farming through seed and other policy changes at the national government level is not a solution to poverty.

In Africa, 80 percent of "noncertified" seed comes from millions of smallholder farmers who recycle and exchange an "open-source knowledge bank" of fertile seeds. Industrialized farming undermines Indigenous knowledge and community traditions, such as the saving and sharing of seeds.

AGRA was founded on a promise to meet certain anti-poverty benchmarks by 2020. Data from AGRA's target countries, however, shows no significant alleviation of poverty. In fact, according to Wise, data shows a 30 percent *increase* in food insecurity.

As people of faith, we believe philanthropic efforts should fund initiatives that work with local communities to ensure self-determination. In this case, smallholder farmers should be able to secure land tenure and have a real stake in the agricultural policy negotiations that impact them.

People in Africa are often depicted as poor and without resources, but concepts such as agroecology, permaculture, and organic farming are in line with traditional customs and African wealth in the form of cultural and ecosystem knowledge.

Busisiwe Mgangxela, an agroecological farmer in South Africa, says, "Agroecology allows us to plant a variety of crops, using organic fertilizers to feed the soil and natural pest control methods. ... Industrial agriculture removes the nutrients from the soil, affecting our ability to produce good crops. We need to focus on sustainable production and consumption in our efforts to mitigate climate change."

Around the world, farm communities face climate challenges first. In India, smallholder farmers and agricultural workers have led sustained protests on these same issues. Investment is critical for small-scale farmers who are building socially just and ecologically sustainable alternative food systems. The Gates Foundation puts its full faith in technological fixes divorced from morality or local knowledge, which leads to a dominance of multinational corporations over African-led food production systems.

The United States is not removed from these same threats. In 2017, Bill and Melinda Gates (who divorced in August) became the largest private owners of farmland in the U.S., according to the agricultural trade magazine *Land Report*, topping the chart with an estimated 242,000 acres.

If global food systems are to become sustainable, then input-intensive crop monocultures and industrial-scale feedlots must become obsolete. Despite the Gates Foundation slogan "All lives have equal value," the needs of the poor and the Earth are not met by AGRA's failed "green revolution."

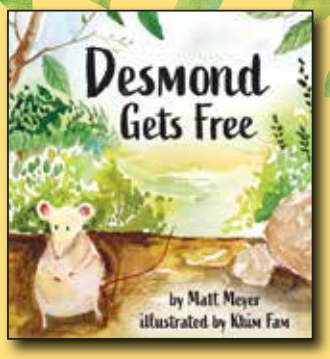
* * *

DATA FROM AGRA'S TARGET COUNTRIES SHOWS A 30 PERCENT *INCREASE* IN FOOD INSECURITY.

Francesca de Gasparis is executive director and **Gabriel Manyangadze** is climate justice coordinator of the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute in Cape Town, South Africa.

"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu



Desmond Gets Free

written by Matt Meyer and illustrated by Khim Fam

"I love this book! Khim Fam's illustrations bring Desmond Tutu's enduring quote to life, while Matt Meyer cleverly navigates the metaphor to teach young readers about the power of community action."

—Innosanto Nagara, author and illustrator of *A is for Activist*

SKINNER HOUSE BOOKS

COMMENTARY BY MARLENA GRAVES

SENSING THE PRESENCE OF ANGELS

When we are where God has a habit of being, we will find the grace of Advent.

I sit in one of our robin's-egg blue chairs on our front porch, one of my favorite places on earth. It has been a haven of peace, a slice of paradise amid the pandemic. It is dark. And late. And chilly. No one is around. Looking up between two branches of our mature red maple, I can see at least one star twinkling.

My mind's eye turns to the stars in the desert. I dream of laying down, blanketed by the desert night, and staring up at the Milky Way in a reverie of wonder. Suddenly my thoughts shift to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth who were minding their own business and about to turn in for the night. I imagine them comforted by the constant companionship of their night lights—the stars—and their sheep, whose bleating lulled them to sleep in the wilderness.

On this night—and really all throughout the year—I cannot stop thinking about how a mass choir of angels unexpectedly appeared to the shepherds to announce Jesus' birth. Advent. Why appear to those looked down upon as poor societal nobodies? Why parade through and light up the night sky in concert for those the world deems to have little to no worth? Who would believe their testimony anyway?

For that matter, why did the God of the universe choose to come to human life through a poor, teenage virgin living in a first-century, Roman-occupied, agricultural region? Jesus' birth had the real possibility of sullying the reputations of Mary and Joseph; it also motivated Herod to hunt them down, as if they were prey. In an effort to secure his kingdom from the threat of a would-be Messiah, Herod exterminated all the boys under two years old in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18). Even as a newborn, Jesus and those associated with him threatened the empire, the dictator—those in power. He and his family turned into political refugees after an angel warned Joseph in a dream to escape to Egypt to avoid Herod's deadly fury (Matthew 2:13-15). Look here! God is among the poor and lowly, among war and terror and massacre at the hands of empire. This is Advent.

More than 2,000 years later, thousands of miles from Palestine, wrapped in chilly darkness, I am looking into the night sky. No angels have appeared to me. No messages have been given to me in dreams telling me to escape. And yet, come to think of it, I have encountered Mary and Jesus and Joseph fleeing for their lives. I have seen them begging for asylum, for mercy here in the United States because of poverty and everyday terrors at home. I have looked them straight in the eyes, and I have seen the face of God. I've spoken to them in Spanish, translated, offered whatever our church and my family could give as they made their way to temporary safety. Indeed, God has appeared to me through them. Among them I have sensed the presence of angels. Advent.

God is always among the poor and the downtrodden—the shepherds, Marys, and Josephs of this world, the tax collectors, the sick, and the sinners. God is smack-dab amid evil empires. And of course, God is among some of the rich too. While we don't instrumentalize the oppressed that we might see God, we *are* to serve them, be among them, and learn from them. When the oppressed are our teachers, when we are where God has a habit of being, then there is no doubt we will experience grace and find ourselves among a host of angels, seen and unseen. We will experience Advent. ⊗

Marlena Graves is author of *The Way Up Is Down* and *Forty Days on Being a Nine: Enneagram Daily Reflections*.

COMMENTARY

BY CHARLOTTE DALWOOD

STANDING ON CONVICTION

It might not be a violation of professional legal ethics to participate in the Roman Catholic Church's campaign to escape financial responsibility for the genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States. But it is a violation of Christian ethics. And for Christian attorneys, the latter should take priority.

The Catholic Church is not the only Christian denomination from which survivors of abuse in church-run residential schools are demanding justice. Episcopalian and Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and other churches also ran residential schools in North America. However, the Catholic Church ran nearly three-quarters of the residential schools in Canada and more than 20 percent of the 367 Indian boarding schools in the United States. Since May, more than 1,300 suspected graves have been identified near five former Indian residential schools in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Four of those were run by Catholic institutions.But thanks to the Catholic Church's lawyers, it has largely succeeded at avoiding financial accountability for its legacy of violence.

In 2006, nearly 50 Canadian Catholic institutions signed a settlement agreement with residential school survivors that committed the institutions to raising 25 million Canadian dollars ($20.05 million) in reparation payments. By leveraging the impending collapse of then-Prime Minister Paul Martin's government, the church's attorneys forced the government to accept a clause that made the deal unenforceable. In the end, the Canadian Catholic Church paid out only CA$3.9 million.

The courts also required the Catholic Church to pay CA$29 million in cash to programs that directly benefit residential school survivors. A *CBC News* investigative report released this summer revealed that the church spent nearly 10 percent of that money on its attorneys and millions more on "administration, a private fundraising company, and unapproved loans." None of the other churches involved in these landmark settlements—Anglican, United Church of Canada, or Presbyterian—engaged in these practices.

If the Catholic Church's recent history is any guide, then there's little doubt its leaders will use every legal mechanism available to resist calls for review of the Canadian settlement cases and to fight the investigation into the legacy of the U.S. boarding school program launched in June by Interior Secretary Deb Haaland. But if the church succeeds, it shouldn't be because of Christian lawyers. Using the same tactics as multinational corporations, the church's lawyers will "protect" its institutional interests at the expense of survivors. Professional legal ethics offers few tools for moral discernment in this area. Attorneys have a duty to act for their client's benefit with integrity. But whether to accept a client in the first place is generally at their discretion.

Faithful Christian ethics, however, are more stringent. In Jeremiah 5, God indicts those among God's people who ensnare others while becoming "rich and powerful" themselves. Such people "do not seek justice," for "they do not promote the cause of the fatherless; they do not defend the just cause of the poor." In other words, it matters to the "Judge of all the earth" (Genesis 18:25) whose side an advocate takes. In the ongoing legal battles over the legacy of residential schools in North America, it is clear who are the poor and the orphaned: those torn from their families and stripped of their cultures to be boarded at colonial institutions. The Catholic Church is well within its secular rights to keep fighting them, but it puts the church at odds with God. And Christian attorneys—especially Catholic ones—have an ethical duty to push back against that crusade, not profit from it.

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PROFESSIONAL LEGAL ETHICS OFFERS FEW TOOLS FOR MORAL DISCERNMENT IN THIS AREA.

Charlotte Dalwood is a juris doctor student at the University of Calgary.

Illustration by Michael George Haddad

UNDER THE SUN

BY JEANIA REE V. MOORE

HERE IS WHERE SALVATION COMES

3

Growing up, I read tons of historical fiction and often imagined the lives and times of my ancestors. My curiosity stemmed, in no small part, from my family, who dragged us to every available Black history and Black art museum. Whether visiting California's first and only Black town, where my great-great-grandparents had bought land; making a pilgrimage to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center during a family reunion; taking Black history bus tours; or hearing family stories from my grandmother and great-aunt, Black history was never far from our everyday lives.

Recently, technological developments and my growing archival research skills have enabled me to dig further into our family history. As DNA ancestry testing and digitized documents have become more widespread, I have been able to find graves and documents that could have been lost to history. The past, for me, has become even more close at hand as a crucial way of understanding the present.

Relating to the past in this way—an approach that resonates with Black families across the diaspora—stands in stark contrast to ongoing efforts to erase, distort, and lie about history. State legislatures, boards

* * *

I FIND MYSELF PONDERING THE SPIRITUAL RESOURCES NECESSARY TO OFFER A MORE HONEST VERSION OF OUR PAST, AND THUS OUR FUTURE.

Illustration by Matt Chase

of education, and church groups such as the Southern Baptist Convention have taken steps to ban the teaching of "critical race theory" (while showing little evidence that they understand what CRT even is); private Christian schools assign right-wing U.S. history textbooks describing chattel slavery as "immigration"; conservative politicians promote racist, whitewashed mythologies as American history.

Such heresies make me angry. However, while historical argument and political advocacy is needed to refute these lies, I find myself pondering the spiritual resources necessary to offer a more honest version of our past, present, and future. The deepest wells from which we need to draw are not just historical. The title for this column, "Under the Sun," echoes a passage from Alice Walker, who says of Southern Black writers, "having been placed, as Camus says, 'halfway between misery and the sun,' they, too, know that 'though all is not well under the sun, history is not everything.'" The most profound testimony against historical heresy is found in the fabric of people's lives.

I think about people like Dan Smith, an 89-year-old man who is the son of Abram Smith, a former slave. When you realize that there are still people alive who are the children of former slaves, slavery doesn't seem that far away. I think about Simeon and Anna, elders who waited on God's promise and then witnessed Jesus' presentation in the temple, showing Advent to be as much about the past as about the future. I think about elders like my 106-year-old former neighbor, now deceased, who was born when women (and many Black men) couldn't vote and who lived to vote for the nation's first Black president. And my great-aunt, still living, who helped me regain historical perspective on Nov. 9, 2016, by chuckling and saying, "You think this is bad?! Oh, honey, you ain't seen nothing."

Simeon and Anna; the reality of one generation removed; the witness of ancestors still living and passed on—these offer their own testimony against futile efforts to deny the past. They remind us that salvation is needed, and comes, to this history, this past that is still present.

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a writer, United Methodist deacon, and doctoral student in religious studies and African American studies at Yale University.

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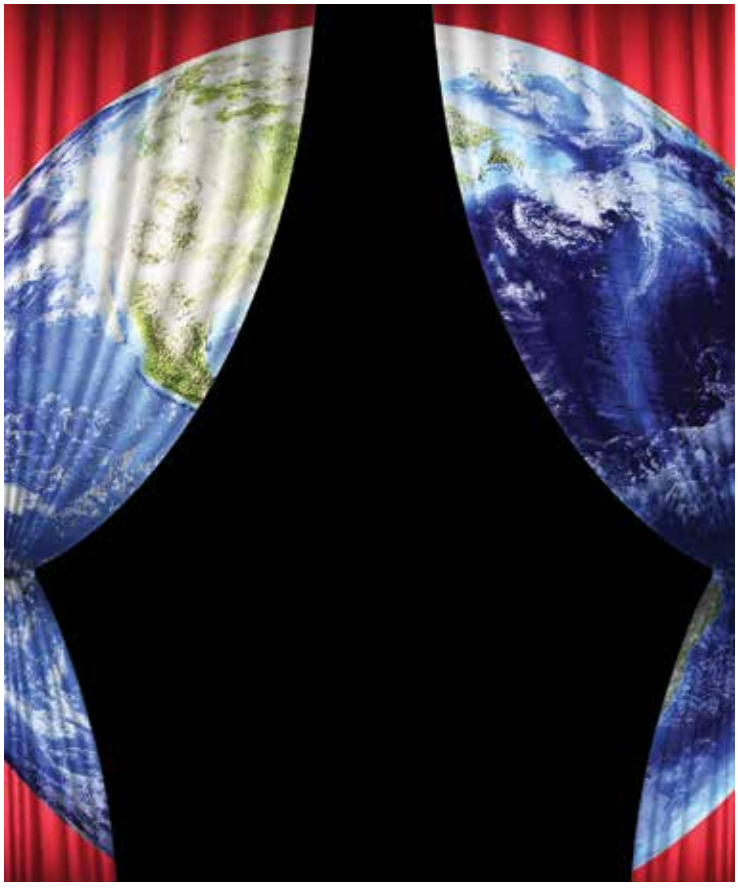
DEEP ECONOMY BY BILL MCKIBBEN

THE THIRD ACT



Who should care about the future? Young people, obviously, because they have to live in it. And they have done their job. I spent the '80s and the '90s and much of the '00s listening to my peers complain about "kids today" and how they were apathetic and how it wasn't like the '60s and on and on. I don't know if it was ever true, but it clearly hasn't been in recent years: On issues from civil rights to prison reform to the one I know best—climate change—young people have been firmly in the forefront.

When I founded 350.org, the first iteration of a global climate movement, it was alongside seven college students—and it was their generation that built that movement out, from the divestment campaigners on college campuses to the Sunrise Movement that spurred the Green New Deal to Greta Thunberg and the many like her who built the powerhouse Fridays for Future coalition.

* * *

FORGET "OK BOOMER." IT'S TIME FOR "OK ELDERS, LET'S GO!"

But they cannot do it alone. They need, in particular, their grandparents and great-grandparents—the boomers and the silent generation above them. Those of us in those categories are the fastest-growing demographic in the country—we add 10,000 to our ranks each day (though, of course, we subtract some too). We vote in huge numbers, and we have ended up with most of the assets, fairly or not.

That's why a few of us are trying to start something called Third Act, to give the kids some backing. For instance, this autumn young people in the climate movement are targeting Chase Bank—it's the biggest lender to the fossil fuel industry. Their efforts are enormously important: Chase cares about whether young people will take out their first credit card with the bank. But they care even more about those who have hefty retirement accounts, and who have the time and acumen to figure out how to move them. So it was a natural synergy to add to the efforts of young people.

We can do the same across many fights, from voter suppression to immigration reform. We understand that, in many ways, our generation has messed up: We're on the verge of leaving the world a worse place than we found it, which is a pretty terrible legacy to contemplate. But it doesn't need to be that way: For many of us, the first act of our life was pretty good, either witnessing or participating in the great liberation movements that really did transform the culture. The second act, perhaps, was a little heavy on consuming. But now we emerge into our final innings with skills, with resources, and with grandkids, all of which give us power.

So, let's use it. There's no time to waste. Forget "OK boomer." It's time for "OK elders, let's go!" ⊗

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, is the author most recently of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*

Illustration by Matt Chase

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SOJOURNERS

EYEWITNESS

4

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"VENGEANCE IS A FORMULA FOR A CONTINUOUS CYCLE OF VIOLENCE."

U.S. soldiers aim at a man who tried to climb the wall at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan / Jim Huylebroek / *The New York Times*

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

"I graduated from university in 1968. I was drafted immediately. I had not really thought much about the war, but the more I talked to the guys who were coming back from Vietnam, the more I realized that this thing was terribly wrong. I began to think of the Vietnamese forces as liberation forces trying to free their country from foreign invasion—we were the invaders.

I went through a crisis of conscience. I saw a news report about soldiers who were speaking out against the war. I thought to myself, I can do that. I began to organize among soldiers in the barracks. We submitted a petition signed by 1,300 active-duty service members that was published in *The New York Times*.

The basis of my commitment to activism is faith: the belief that our role in life is to serve others, to overcome suffering and injustice, especially war, which to me, is the greatest sin.

9/11 was an international criminal conspiracy by extremist groups. The response should have been an international criminal investigation and policing methods rather than military methods. But the motive at the time was vengeance—a formula for a continuous cycle of violence.

This is nowhere more dramatically and tragically illustrated than the collapse of the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan. I'm hoping that this can be a wake-up call about the counterproductive nature of the strategies we employed against violent extremism. We've sent our troops on missions that cannot be achieved.

This is the time to create a new paradigm for the U.S. role in the world—to mobilize public opinion from both the Left and the Right, to call for the U.S. to end its policy of military interventionism, to reduce the size of the military, and to focus our approach on diplomacy and development on helping people in need rather than sending our military forces all over the world." ⊗

David Cortright is director of the Global Policy Initiative at Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. He spoke with Sojourners' Jenna Barnett.

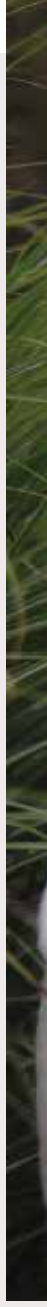
WORK OF THE PEOPLE

Cole Arthur Riley's social media space **@BlackLiturgies** gives voice to a spirituality born of the movement for Black lives and the challenges of everyday living.

BY JEANIA REE V. MOORE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY EMMALYN PURE

For the millennial founder of a viral social media account, Cole Arthur Riley is surprisingly unplugged.



"This is a fun fact that most people probably wouldn't guess," she told *Sojourners* in June, "but I actually don't have a smartphone."

Riley is the creator and curator of @BlackLiturgies, an Instagram profile and social media "space where Black spiritual words live in dignity, lament, rage, and liberation to the glory of God." It is where, until this fall, she posted almost daily the liturgies she writes: Liturgies for Ma'Khia Bryant, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd. Prayers of remembrance for the Tulsa Race Massacre. Invocations for those living with chronic illness and those struggling with anxiety. @BlackLiturgies goes beyond the usual liturgical calendar of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, embedding that rotation within a larger grammar of spiritual expression for Black survival and thriving.

Riley's liturgies look and circulate like memes, but trade humor for a holiness rooted in the embodied knowledge and sacred truth of Black life. The bricolage of written prayer, quotations, scriptures, poetry, and statements in white text on brown, green, and blue backgrounds gained thousands of likes and reposts within hours. If you are on social media, the images are likely familiar, but the person behind them, and her story, less so.

An Episcopalian, Riley began @BlackLiturgies in late June 2020 out of a hunger for a liturgical expression that would speak to her Blackness. Amid the ongoing pandemic and her own processing of the murders of Taylor, Elijah McClain, Arbery, and Floyd, she found that the words of Thomas Cranmer, author of the 16th-century *Book of Common Prayer*, were not cutting it.

She initially hoped to connect with a handful of other people who, like her, valued collective liturgy and were seeking Black community, but her words quickly attracted a larger audience. By the end of the first month, she had more than 5,000 followers; six months later, that number topped 100,000. Today, as Riley prepares for her next vocational phase as a writer, liturgist, and public voice in contemplative spirituality, her story and that of @BlackLiturgies offer a portrait of contemporary faith, justice, and liturgical community in a time of social distancing, white supremacy, and the movement for Black lives.

THE DAILY REALITIES OF BLACK LIVES MATTERING

The viral reception of @BlackLiturgies sounds like an aspiring Christian influencer's dream—but for Riley, living a quiet life in upstate New York with a small circle of family and friends, it was an unexpected development that surprises her still. Most @BlackLiturgies followers are not Episcopalian, and many are not Christian, yet they gravitate to Riley's liturgies, which employ traditional Christian forms of written prayer, including long-form prayer, prayers of the people, confession, and breath prayer.

Riley makes Christian liturgy responsive to the rhythms and realities of Black life mattering. For example, in the days before the closing of the Derek Chauvin trial, she offered a guided meditation to prepare our souls for a verdict. In the aftermath of conviction, she posted a liturgy for those experiencing the flood of mixed emotions: relief, hopefulness, exhaustion, rage, the "coexistence" of joy and sorrow.

Though initially surprised by her viral reception, Riley early on incorporated the growing @BlackLiturgies into her life while maintaining balance. Despite her sizeable Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram followings, where her more than 130,000 followers (at this writing) include several celebrity accounts, Riley spends most of her time *off* social media. On a regular day, she told *Sojourners* this summer, she spends the first hour in complete silence ("It's part personality, part spiritual discipline," she admitted with a laugh). She then writes that day's liturgy during her morning routine, publishing it unedited from her laptop or husband's smartphone. She engages with followers for about 45 minutes, then logs off.

"So, throughout the day, I can really kind of rest," she says. "I don't want to say [I] forget about @BlackLiturgies, because I do carry it with me, but I can just disengage in a way that is healthy, hopeful, and helps me manage things."

It's an approach to social media—to virtual space as a very real cause of depletion as well as empowerment—consistent with who Riley is and the work of formation to which she is called. When Riley began @BlackLiturgies, she was the content and spiritual formation manager at Chesterton House at Cornell University. This fall, she is becoming executive curator of a new center at Cornell that will offer diverse and liberating spiritual formation content, which Riley will help create.

Liberation at the heart of formation informs @BlackLiturgies' distinctive offering. It reframes what "liturgical" language sounds like, giving voice to some of the most necessary yet silenced spiritual dispositions.

"If there's one dominant emotion @BlackLiturgies was born out of," Riley says, "it was anger. That's just the most honest thing I can say about it."

Writing from a place of truth and anger locates Riley in a long tradition of prophets, activists, and spiritual leaders—Black theologian James Cone once described anger as the beginning of theology. Like Cone and others, Riley's anger was sparked by the silence and lies of the church, alongside society broadly. Recalling summer 2020, she explains, "I was

@BlackLiturgies' insistence upon not catering to the white gaze is an expansive liturgical offering in and of itself.

very angry at the conditions of the world, the conversations I was finding myself in, that were demanding some kind of Christian civility that was a cloaked way to say 'calm down' and 'don't be angry.' I was in a season of rejecting that."

Her Aug. 21, 2020, liturgy begins, "Anger is not the opposite of civility. / If rage isn't civil, then neither was Jesus." A long-form prayer concludes, "We will no longer abandon our rage. Make us people of holy fury." In the caption, Riley includes a breath prayer: "INHALE: Keep us from resentment. / EXHALE: Protect our anger."

TENDERNESS AND TRUTH-TELLING

Riley's liturgies have at their core frank refusals naming the unholy manipulations of white fragility, heteropatriarchy, and other systems and social norms that warp, deform, oppress, and kill. The uproar over Simone Biles' and Naomi Osaka's temporary withdrawals from professional sports this summer sparked on @BlackLiturgies a liturgical confrontation with nefarious cultures of Black women's self-sacrifice.

"Grateful for Black women who refuse to kill themselves for someone else's definition of 'greatness,'" the first slide of the July 27, 2021 liturgy reads. "You were born worthy. / Your boundaries are holy ground." The following slides contain breath prayers: "INHALE: I can honor my limit. / EXHALE: This breath is enough. / INHALE: I am free to walk away. / EXHALE: I won't apologize for healing." In the caption, Riley writes, "Let Simone and Naomi be. I don't want to watch Black women kill themselves for our entertainment. They are not symbols. Let them be. #blackliturgies."

For Riley, the public response to Biles and Osaka was as much about our own discomfort with limitation as it was about misogyny and racism. Through liturgy, Riley not only restores the humanity of two women of color; she extends the opportunity for us to join in healing, too. This subtle shift occurs often in her prayers, illustrating her view that "liturgy can be a profound act of solidarity." Riley again invited us into solidarity when, in a mid-September post, she shared her own season of withdrawal for personal health reasons. Rather than a performative wokeness that fears and masks its shortcomings, @BlackLiturgies offers space for a collective truth-telling that is vulnerable and human, open and authentic.

Tenderness shapes the truth-telling in Riley's poetic liturgy for Ma'Khia Bryant, referencing Bryant's TikTok hairstyle tutorials: "I watched you lay your edges, / watched butterfly clips crown your head. / We will not let them reduce you / to anything less than sacred." A long-form prayer follows, opening with a simple truth: "God of Ma'Khia / She deserved more ..." A breath prayer states: "INHALE: God, protect Black girls. / EXHALE: Remind them of their glory."

The liturgy for Ahmaud Arbery similarly looks at him with love: "I will remember you, but not as hunted. / As Black Glory running in the wind. / The Face of God lacing up his shoes. / Justice is coming."

@BlackLiturgies' insistence upon not catering to the white gaze is an expansive liturgical offering in and of itself.

THE STORIES THAT MAKE US

Though Riley conceived of @BlackLiturgies during 2020's global reckoning with anti-Black racism, her work has deeper

roots. She and an older sister were raised by her father, a teen dad, in Pittsburgh. Her dad nurtured their creativity by allowing them to opt out of housework by writing poems or the first few lines of a short story. Her grandmother, the family matriarch and another central influence, also encouraged Riley's writing and development.

Both father and grandmother, writers and storytellers themselves, inspire Riley's forthcoming book, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*, due out from Penguin Random House in February. The title evokes Baby Suggs' hush harbor exhortations of Black self-love in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Riley's household growing up was not religious. Yet some of her deepest and earliest spiritual formation took place there. In her book, Riley explores the generational strands contributing to her own faith and becoming. She pairs family and personal stories with Christian contemplative reflection to think through dignity, fear, lament, and rage. Riley shares her journey toward a contemplative spirituality of embodiment and liberation and invites us to encounter our own stories of selfhood, heritage, and healing.

Christianity became a part of Riley's life when she began exploring the faith and practice on her own in high school and college. As a first-generation college student at the University of Pittsburgh attending church consistently and of her own volition for the first time, Riley was simultaneously introduced to university life—particularly Black literature classes—and to Christianity, and both meshed into one exposure.

"I'm in the class, and I'm reading Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston for the first time," she explains, "and ... I couldn't separate that from Sunday when I'm reading Isaiah for the first time." Riley cites James Baldwin, Octavia Butler, and Thomas Merton alongside Morrison and Hurston as influences who mentored her "from the grave" and continue to inform her intertwined faith and writing today.

NEW, BUT NOT NEW

Considering her faith's rootedness in ancestral story and tradition, it is no surprise that—despite her platform being social media, with its up-to-the-minute nature—Riley eschews the language of novelty when describing her work with @BlackLiturgies. "What I'm doing, it's really not all that new," she says. "And I don't mean that in a self-deprecating manner. We have people in Black spirituality who have gone before us, but we haven't always had the ability to preserve our own spiritual artifacts, our own spiritual storytelling and expressions. We've had a lot of that taken from us .... A huge impulse of @BlackLiturgies is working to curate a liturgical expression that frankly already exists."

"Curate," in its compositional and religious senses, aptly describes Riley's work drawing from myriad traditions, as well as how her followers respond. @BlackLiturgies followers receive the space as an act of care, and they daily comment ("Amen," "Ashé," "Preach!"), repost, message, and engage the carved-out space for rest and spiritual nourishment. Their responsiveness reflects how @BlackLiturgies expresses the literal meaning of liturgy: "public service," or "work of" or "for" the people.

Social media's communal nature, however, also leaves these platforms vulnerable to abuse. Earlier this year, Riley began to receive a repetitive error message from Instagram warning that her account might be deleted. At the urging of friends, she posted a call for help in her feed, explaining that either Instagram suspected she was a bot, or someone was reporting her account as violating community guidelines, putting her in danger of losing account access. In droves, people reposted the message and reported the issue to Instagram and Facebook (which owns Instagram). Riley's threatened status was swiftly resolved.

It was a turning point for Riley, in which she realized the breadth and strength of the @BlackLiturgies community—"The people really came through," she says—yet the incident also demonstrates the perils of social media for Black women creators. Black creators are routinely threatened and targeted by trolls, misreported as spam, and susceptible to wrongful suspension or deletion.

Riley is working on a future website and

home for @BlackLiturgies less susceptible to the vulnerabilities of social media. She explains, "These [social media] platforms weren't really made to help or protect Black voices. The algorithms weren't made for us. I'm not too keen on the idea of my art being a way to draw people into a technology that isn't always helpful and healing and healthy."

The challenge of maintaining control is also an issue when it comes to the target constituency. Riley's primary audience is African American, but many followers are not Black. Riley says a tiresome aspect of her work is correcting non-Black followers' frequent misunderstandings and misappropriations that decenter Black people in her liturgies. Sometimes, white people ask Riley for permission to repost liturgies they read as racially unspecific. Her response is not approval, but rather a question: Can you engage and repost without centering yourself? What would it mean for you to imagine and pray for a Black woman at the center of this liturgy on anxiety?

The popularity of @BlackLiturgies among non-Black people reflects the enthusiasm with which white progressive Christians and liberals seek out Black content to consume in the post-June 2020 era, a disturbing phenomenon. Decentering whiteness in the public sphere is a monumental task in more ways than one.

FINDING HER OWN LIBERATION

The enormity of the challenge, however, is scaled back down through the grounding returns of @BlackLiturgies itself. In a culture that routinely extinguishes Black breath, for a justice movement where "We Can't Breathe" is both anguish and rallying cry, and at a time when breathing together is a public health hazard, Riley's liturgical use of breath prayer has been a profound intervention. Through breath prayer, Riley reorients Black people toward restorative embodiment—she places us back in our bodies as an act of spiritual warfare, of liberative grace, like Baby Suggs in *Beloved*.

This embodied ethic of self-affirmation is reflected in a bittersweet way with one particular post. On June 5, Riley posted a liturgy for Pride, in which she affirmed queer belonging, confessed and decried Christian homophobia and transphobia, and identified herself as a queer woman whose identity is often misconstrued because of her marriage to a man. It was the first day she had a net loss of followers—until this post @BlackLiturgies had a positive net growth of at least 50 followers each day. To Riley, the message was clear: "We don't want to be led in prayer" by a queer Black woman.

The unfollows recall the riskiness of liturgy, reminding us of where the stakes truly lie—in the church and world, yes, but also within the self. The June 5 liturgy is instructive. It opens with a Prayers of the People invocation: "For those who were taught to hate their queerness." It makes Pride a divine disposition and leads us in saying the words aloud: "God is proud of you. / God is proud of you." The following slides expand self-compassion, dignity, and care, ending with three breath prayers that move us to root ourselves in God.

Sacred self-affirmation is the Black liturgical center on @BlackLiturgies. While the loss of followers provokes complex feelings for her, Riley is secure. Knowing that she could get away with not posting for Pride at all—she had received no privately messaged prayer requests on the topic—but posting anyway, affirmed her decision. Living into and doing the hard, true thing is, for Riley, an offering, an act of worship—a prayer.

At the end of the day on June 5, Riley's mind, body, and spirit were at ease.

"I'm going to sleep, and I feel so grounded, so proud, and a little more free."

"These platforms weren't really made to help or protect Black voices."

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a writer, United Methodist deacon, and doctoral student in religious studies and African American studies at Yale University.

CAN
YOU
LOOSEN
ORION'S
BELT?

FINDING OUR HUMAN PLACE IN GOD'S CREATION

BY DEBORAH HAARSMA

THE SKIES ABOVE CAN GIVE US A DAILY REMINDER THAT WE ARE INTRINSICALLY PART OF GOD'S CREATION. GOD NOT ONLY CREATED US WITH INTENT, BUT GOD ALSO REACHED OUT TO MEET US IN HUMAN HISTORY.

In this season of Advent, we remember the coming of Jesus Christ to earth. God became fully human and lived among us (John 1:14). As Eugene Peterson paraphrased it, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, MSG). Jesus' body, like ours, was made of atoms that were once between the stars. In his incarnation, Jesus not only took up human form and human DNA but took up atoms that tied him to our planet, our sun, and the stars beyond. Yet he was still fully God!

Jesus Christ is the cosmic Creator. As John 1 declares, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (verse 3). I am still amazed whenever I remember that God, Creator of the galaxies, became one of us and walked the dusty roads of Palestine. How can humanity be insignificant if the Creator took on our form?

Many years ago on a January night, I had several astronomy students with me near Flagstaff, Ariz., to study galaxy clusters with a research telescope. On a break from operating the sophisticated equipment, we walked outside to take a look at the stars with our naked eyes. We all could identify major constellations or star patterns such as Orion (right top, the line of horizontal stars in the middle is the belt of the warrior Orion), but this was a rare chance to view them in the clear desert air, far from city lights. A multitude of faint sparkling stars filled the spaces that usually looked empty. We noticed details in the shapes of constellations that we had never seen before.

Before electric lighting, everyone had great views of the night sky. People were familiar with the constellations and the regular motions of the moon and planets. Despite modern lighting and modern distractions, the wonders

The constellation Orion over the Central Bohemian Highlands in the Czech Republic / Vojtěch Bauer

The interstellar nebula Westerlund 2 / NASA, ESA, the Hubble Heritage Team (STScI/AURA), A. Nota (ESA/STScI), and the Westerlund 2 Science Team

The first visual evidence of a black hole in the center of galaxy M87 / EHT Collaboration

of the night sky are still ours today. Think back to a time when you were outdoors at night and looked up. Maybe you saw the full moon above a city skyline, or the arc of the Milky Way over a rural field. Do you recall the sense of wonder you felt?

Viewing the heavens takes us beyond ourselves. Whatever troubles we're living with, looking up reminds us of cosmic beauty and a larger reality. We are part of a vast universe that is beyond our circumstances and beyond our control.

Modern telescopes now reveal abundant wonders far beyond what our eyes can see. In 2019, the first photographic evidence of a black hole was released (p. 30, bottom), the result of a tour de force effort by 11 telescopes around the world. This black hole—an object where the gravity is so intense that even light cannot escape—is located at the core of the galaxy M87 in the constellation Virgo. In the image, the dark space at the center isn't empty, but contains a mass 6.5 *billion* times more massive than our sun. All we see is the material at the edge of the black hole, glowing just before it falls in.

ENCOUNTERING THE CREATOR

For people of faith, the sense of wonder at the night sky goes deeper than spectacle. We know that the heavens are declaring not their own glory, but the glory of *God* (Psalm 19:1). The universe didn't arise on its own or from an impersonal force. Rather, there is a Creator behind this universe. The One who made the stars in the night sky and the massive black holes is the same God we encounter in the Bible and in our prayers. A scientific explanation doesn't replace God—it *can't* replace God. Science may explain how a black hole works, but our faith shows us the One who made it.

Through the natural world, God's attributes are revealed to us in displays of God's glory, power, and beauty. We experience that revelation as embodied people. While the flat photographs of galaxies and black holes are amazing, how much more wondrous is the bodily experience of the natural world. When we gaze at the stars on a chilly winter night or hike in the mountains on a warm summer day, we not only *see* nature—but we feel it, hear it, smell it. Nature brings God's revelation home to our senses in ways that words simply cannot.

Psalm 19 describes the stars as declaring, proclaiming, and pouring forth speech, yet without words. By transcending language, the heavens speak to people of all cultures and nations, calling everyone to know the Creator. The European Protestant reformer John Calvin described the world as the theater of God's glory, with God as the principal actor clothing himself with nature, "the visible splendor of his apparel." Calvin pictured God using nature to evoke our desire for intimacy with God. To ignore the wonders of the created world is to miss God courting us!

The carbon, nitrogen, and iron atoms in our bodies were once between the stars.

NOT ONLY SPECTATORS, BUT MEMBERS OF GOD'S CREATION

If you haven't read it lately, check out Psalm 29, a majestic portrayal of God's glory in a thunderstorm. After seeing the lightning, hearing the thunder, and feeling the whirlwind, all people join with the storm to cry "Glory!" Humans are called to join the non-living creation in praise to God. We are fellow creatures with the stars and the mountains. Jesus even said that if his disciples kept quiet, "the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:40). St. Francis of Assisi wrote a beautiful canticle of gratitude for "Brother Sun and Sister Moon" in which Francis comes alongside his companion creatures in praise of the Most High. Humans are the verbal part of creation's praise to God; of all the creatures, we were the ones created in God's image to reflect God most clearly (Genesis 1:26-27). If we fail in our part, we impact everything else.

We are fellow creatures with the sun and moon not only because we were made by the same Creator, but because we are made of the same stuff. The interstellar nebula called Westerlund 2 (p. 30, middle) shows this process in action. A nebula is a cloud of gas and dust between the stars. Westerlund 2's beautiful colors are caused by different types of gasses, all glowing in the light of the stars. The dark finger-shaped regions are dust clouds, and at the tips of these fingers, hidden within them, are baby stars in the process of forming. This nebula in our own Milky Way is a stellar nursery. A star forms here when a swirling clump of gas and dust collapses under gravity until the center becomes dense enough for fusion to occur. In the image, the cluster of stars in the middle-right recently formed from this nebula.

When the swirling dust clump is collapsing, some of it forms into a disk around the young star. That disk eventually coalesces into planets orbiting the star, which means that the atoms in planets

Pages 28-29: Nebulae in the constellation Orion / Maarten Vanleenhove / Flickr

such as ours were once part of a beautiful interstellar nebula such as Westerlund 2. The carbon, nitrogen, and iron atoms in our bodies were once between the stars; we are made of star dust. We are part of the universe and not separate from it.

Some scientists use natural explanations such as these to argue that God did not create us or that God is irrelevant. But a scientific explanation does not replace God—science and God are not in competition. Science tells us *how* God goes about making stars, but that doesn't mean God is absent. While we believe that God certainly has the power to do a miracle—for example, to simply speak the word and have stars or people pop into existence—we also believe that God can use non-miraculous means to create. God made us from the dust of stars, and that dust in turn was made previously by God using mechanisms we understand scientifically, such as gravity and fusion.

In both the scientific picture and in the scriptural picture of Genesis 2:7, we see that God chose to work slowly, with dust. The choice of method does not change God's intent. We were created to bear God's image, to know and love God as embodied people with ties to the rest of this marvelous creation.

HOW MANY STARS HAS GOD MADE?

Before modern science, the thousands of stars visible in the night sky already pointed to uncountable abundance (Genesis 15:5). With modern astronomy, we know our galaxy contains hundreds of billions of stars. And our galaxy isn't alone. Arp 273 in the constellation Andromeda (p.33, bottom) is a beautiful pair of galaxies that each contain hundreds of billions of stars.

Galaxies such as Arp 273 were around long before humans noticed them. The sheer abundance of creation, previously unknown to us, suggests that God has purposes in creation that are beyond us. One of God's purposes seems simply to delight in created things. In Genesis 1, God calls the various parts of the natural world "good" before making humans. In Job 39, God describes wild animals and celebrates their features, most of which have little practical use to humans. "The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully, though they cannot compare with the wings and feathers of the stork," God tells Job (verse 13). As theologian Richard Mouw has preached, God's capacity for delight seems to far exceed our own.

The universe contains not just a few galaxies, but billions of galaxies. One of my favorites is an entire cluster of galaxies called Abell 370 in the constellation Cetus (p. 33, top). Each of the yellow dots in that image is not a star, but an entire galaxy of hundreds of billions of stars. Our own galaxy, the Milky Way, would be small compared to Abell 370, about the size of one of the smaller dots. And humans are miniscule compared to our galaxy—an invisible speck. The vast physical scale of the universe is overwhelming.

But what does our smallness mean? Astronomer Carl Sagan gave an atheist perspective: "We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of the universe."

Lost? Forgotten? Christianity tells a better story of our human place in God's creation. The Bible doesn't deny that we are physically small. In fact, God reminds Job repeatedly that Job doesn't have God's knowledge and power over creation (see Job 38). God actually refers to the constellations by name, saying that humans can't change the stars of the Pleiades. We can't loosen the belt of Orion. We have no power over the stars and constellations in the night sky, much less over massive galaxy clusters like Abell 370. Yet the Bible tells that we are significant in the cosmos. Even before God met us in history in Jesus Christ, God created us with a purpose.

OUR PLACE IN GOD'S CREATION

The question of humanity's significance was around long before modern science. The psalmist asks, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is humankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:3-4). Today we could replace "moon and stars" with "black holes and galaxies" but the question remains. An answer is given in the next verses: "You have made [humans] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands" (verses 5-6).

Although God made us part of creation, we were given a responsibility distinct from other creatures. "We are *more* than dust," as Old Testament professor John Walton reminds us. God created us to be more than what we're made of. In fact, we're called

Listen for God courting you through the beauty and wonder of God's creation.

Abell 370, a cluster of galaxies in the constellation Cetus /
NASA, ESA / Hubble, HST Frontier Field

The paired galaxies of Arp 273 /
NASA, ESA and the Hubble Heritage Team

to serve this planet with "dominion." In scripture, those with dominion are commanded to not be selfish nor abuse the governed. They are commanded to shepherd and care for the governed, to take special care of the oppressed. God gave us the role of shepherding and caring for this planet, giving us a significant responsibility in our solar system.

One small action we can take as stewards of creation is to reduce light pollution so that more people can see the Milky Way. While not harmful to life and health like other pollution, light pollution hinders our view of the heavens. Many light fixtures unnecessarily direct light upward where it scatters off the atmosphere and creates an orange glow over cities. Fortunately, we can safely illuminate nighttime activities by installing light fixtures that direct the light only downward where needed. Consider taking children in light-polluted areas out into "dark sky" country for some star gazing, so they can experience for themselves how the heavens declare the glory of God.

This Advent I invite you to look up when you walk outside at night. The next time it's not cloudy, take a moment to enjoy the stars, planets, or moon. In November and December this year, you have the opportunity to see three bright planets at once—Jupiter, Saturn, and Venus. Look for three bright dots, low in the southwest sky, about 30 minutes after sunset (an empty athletic field can be a good viewing spot). If it's clear from Dec. 6 to 8, look for the crescent moon passing right next to the three planets. This is also a great season to view the Orion constellation (in the southern sky later in the evening) and the Pleiades star cluster (nearly overhead).

As you gaze at the heavens, don't rush. Take a moment to pause. Exhale. Remember that the atoms in your body were once dancing between the stars, that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14) to be part of this planet and called to care for it. Listen for God courting you through the beauty and wonder of God's creation.

Though we cannot "bind the chains of the Pleiades" or "loosen Orion's belt" (Job 38:31), we can take a moment to join our song with that of the constellations in declaring the glory of God.

Deborah Haarsma is an astrophysicist and author. As president of BioLogos, she shows how Christ-centered faith and rigorous science work hand in hand.

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MAPPING THE LAND FOR GOOD

An interview with Molly Burhans, Catholic cartographer and climate leader

By Élan Young
Illustration by Israel G. Vargas

Maps are not just drawings of a place; they are also windows into a perspective. In the era of European colonial expansion, maps were essential tools.

The 15th century imperial edicts known collectively as the Doctrine of Discovery theologically and politically justified the brutal seizure of land not inhabited by European Christians. This set into motion a new worldview that is the basis for all modern property ownership and established a relationship to the land based on colonization rather than habitation. As a result of this and other political arrangements, the Roman Catholic Church controls about 177 million acres of land around the world.

Molly Burhans is a Catholic, an activist, and an entrepreneur. She is also a cartographer and geographic information system (GIS) analyst who sees the church's landholdings as an opportunity for a global spiritual and ecological transformation. If church maps in the past too often represented cultural oppression and land domination, the maps Burhans creates are powerful tools for ecological regeneration and social repair.

In 2015, Burhans founded GoodLands, an independent nonprofit organization using GIS technology to help the Catholic Church leverage its landholdings for wise land-use decisions impacting climate change and related crises. After visiting the Vatican and receiving massive data sets on the church's global landholdings, she presented the first global, data-based maps of church lands to Pope Francis.

Bringing the church's maps online makes publicly accessible this unique visual data that both tells a story and invites action. The hundreds of maps in GoodLands' Catholic GeoHub include visualizations of the church's global carbon footprint, the dioceses with the greatest biodiversity, and projections of how a 5-foot sea level rise would affect the Boston Archdiocese.

Burhans' commitment to the Catholic Church extends beyond environmental issues. In 2017 she volunteered her skills to BishopAccountability.org, a publicly available library of information on the Catholic clergy abuse crisis. Data that is accessible geographically can provide users with clearer policy options. In mapping the priest abuse cases, for example, Burhans was able to identify the policies that were most effective in protecting minors.

At 32, Burhans has amassed some unusual life experiences. She not only spent time in her 20s discerning a vocation to religious life inspired by the social justice work of Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and the Catholic Worker movement, she was also an Occupy Wall Street activist before co-founding a worker-owned aquaculture farming cooperative on vacant industrial land in her hometown of Buffalo, N.Y. Additionally, she was named a Young Champion of the Earth for North America by the United Nations and received Sierra Club's EarthCare award in September. Today, the Connecticut-based GoodLands offers planning, map-making, and data systems services to landholders who care about the environment.

Élan Young (@YoungElan), who lives in eastern Tennessee, interviewed Burhans by Zoom in August 2021. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Élan Young: How do you see the mapping of land as integral to building ecological and social resilience?

Molly Burhans: Generally speaking, you need to understand the environment before you do environmental programs. Land is like a blueprint. You wouldn't build a building without a blueprint. What I've seen over the years is there are some groups that really have gotten GIS fantastically, and they use GIS in a way to inform their programs. If you don't, and I see this so often, people are like, "Oh, let's plant 1,000 trees." If you're not planting the right trees in the right place, you're wasting resources and potentially causing harm.

It's about being smart about where you put your programs; it's about understanding the context. Once you have that baseline of information, then it's transformative. It allows you to not waste resources and allows you to multiply the impact.

How does the mission of GoodLands go beyond building climate resilience for the Catholic Church and its members? What I've known since the start is that Catholic is not a niche unless you're doing something very Catholic, like a specific youth ministry or selling rosary beads or prayer cards or pilgrimages. Catholic Refugee Services serve everyone. Catholic health care serves everyone. It doesn't matter if they're Catholic or not. [It's] built to serve with a preferential option for the poor. And ideally, and quite often, serves with excellence. Catholic environmental programs aren't just Catholic. We have to think of them as serving not only the Catholic Church but anyone who comes to us—and serving with excellence and providing value for the entire world. That is the goal: excellent care for creation.

Behind climate resilience there must be foundational data. We realized that helping the Catholic Church actualize [the environmental encyclical] *Laudato Sí* and environmental impacts through conservation didn't fit the traditional conservation business model. Conservation in the U.S. is largely motivated by the financial side, reducing taxes for donating land to conservation easements. But if you don't pay taxes then it's hard to incentivize. It's hard to help an organization balance their books, even if their values are compelling them to do that work. We figured out that a new model had to be built, and it had to take into account a "triple bottom line," which means accounting for a social impact, an environmental impact, and financial realities that can help support the implementation and realization of these programs.

We mapped every Catholic property in the U.S.—that was necessary to break open these conversations. We analyzed the data with green infrastructure mapping done in collaboration with environmental NGOs, the Environmental Protection Agency,

and Esri [a maker of GIS software used by GoodLands].

Beyond the Catholic Church, and beyond climate, we're hoping to figure out how to franchise or help other religious groups replicate our work. We've been approached by a large group of evangelicals. We've been approached by a coalition of Buddhist monks. I want to help them look at how we've understood our security and the "top-down and bottom-up" approach we use so they can do it themselves.

Is there a particular success story that you would like to highlight? We've done more than a dozen major projects that are highlighted on our website. We created the Catholic Geospatial Infrastructure—a geohub that supports open access to more than 300 data sets, apps, and maps that GoodLands has curated. We've done a green infrastructure assessment of all Catholic-affiliated properties held by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and a global biodiversity assessment of the Catholic Church. The vast majority of our work to date has been research and development to build interest. When I started, nobody even knew what a map was or wanted it. So, I had to go into religious orders at the start and say, "Hey, I'm going to do this for free for you if you want." Thankfully, I had a great network of experts and volunteers. We had to get our foot in the door to do work that is environmental in any capacity.

Making the first global map of the Catholic Church really moved stuff forward. [In June] we saw the Vatican release its property portfolio. I personally was not in the room when that happened, but I would not have any shadow of doubt that my work has helped push that forward. My relations in Rome helped provide foundational data, which was necessary for all our other work. Now we know the pitfalls of working with a diocese in digital transformation where sometimes there's not even an Excel spreadsheet.

There's so much work to do with the land and with climate change, but what becomes clear over and over again is that the more we do to build this understanding of land and the potential to transform it in an informed way, the more the Catholic Church leadership in Rome really needs to understand geographic [information] standards, which is something every country has.

In 2017, I gave the Holy See a proposal for a cartography institute. In 2018, to my surprise, Pope Francis approved that I establish a trial institute. The approved setup lacked the resources for it to do what we knew needed to be done for my role to be effective in managing their global data with geographic standards. I sent a counteroffer, and now I'm waiting.

> "Technology won't solve anything if the human heart isn't moved."

How do you respond to the concern about an over-reliance on technology in our quest to mitigate the climate crisis or come into balance with nature? Technology won't solve anything if the human heart isn't moved. We need what Pope Francis calls an "ecological conversion." At the end of the day, nothing will change without that. That goes for any of the systems in which we are facing challenges—economics, capitalism, it doesn't matter.

I'm not an expert in economics, but Pope Francis talks about that in addition to technology. We can all argue about which textbook theory is the best or which economic system to embrace, but at the end of the day, if we don't deal with human greed, then it's all going to fail. And same with technology. Looking at the response of anti-vaxxers, we know that presenting facts doesn't change people. We need a conversion of heart and of mind. Without that, a technocratic paradigm is destined to be terrifying. So, the warning is fair. At the same time, the continuation of civilization will be enabled by using the best technology and most advanced science, novel collaborations, and creativity to reframe our relationship with nature.

Do you think the Catholic Church can move toward faithful transformative land use without addressing the Doctrine of Discovery and the generational trauma that results from land seizure and other colonial atrocities? No. Very easily, no—we cannot move forward. I have had listening sessions with Indigenous elders throughout the years. When the news broke about [large unmarked] graves found at residential schools [in Canada], I wept and recognized that my weeping was a fraction of the weeping of Indigenous peoples across [the continent] whose voices were not heard for generations, and who even now haven't received a proper response from the Catholic Church.

If we are to heal the land and allow land to work for good, then we have to heal each other. Maps are great because you can have conversations about the palimpsest. The land is a palimpsest of our histories. And in these layers are buried atrocities of the past. Land is so difficult.

What does land restoration look like to you? I don't like the phrase "land restoration." I prefer the language of thriving. I say this notion of thriving because I think that's how we have to think about ecosystem restoration. I don't think restoration is a realistic idea, and I don't like the term "ecosystems health" either. I use it all the time, so forgive me, but this has been kind of a thorn in my side. When you restore health to a person who was seriously ill, they are not the same ever again—psychologically, physically. In the Anthropocene, when I look at what we're facing, I don't think we know what a healthy ecosystem is.

So, what are we going to do? We have to figure out how to thrive—not to restore, but to regenerate. We are here to tend the garden, and we've messed it up tremendously. But at this moment, too, we have no choice but to figure it out. Tending the garden is a labor of love. It creates health. It's a multiplier of every Christian impact and mission. I wouldn't be Catholic if I didn't believe Catholicism, but what I do see across faiths is a beautiful compulsion to love. And a fundamental truth of loving your neighbor is tending the garden. ⊗

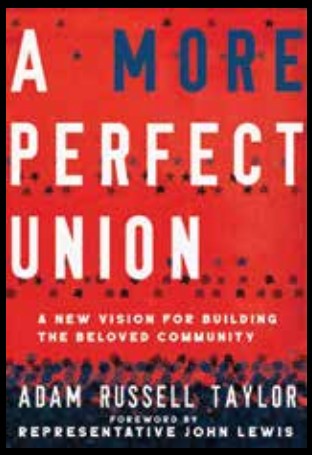
Join us in building the Beloved Community this Giving Tuesday

Photo by Jeff Fuentes Gleghorn for Sojourners

Sojourners staff members attend the Sept. 2021
Welcome Back Congress March for Citizenship, Care, and Climate

In a spirit of gratitude for all that you, the community of *Sojourners* readers, have made possible this year, we're giving back during this Giving Tuesday season. With your gift of $50 or more, we'll send you a copy of Sojourners president Rev. Adam Russell Taylor's new book, *A More Perfect Union: A New Vision for Building the Beloved Community*.

Give online at **sojo.net/givingtuesday21** by Nov. 30, 2021, or **call 1-800-714-7474** and ask for donor relations.



GIVINGTUESDAY x SOJOURNERS

JUMAANE WILLIAMS LIVES INTO THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PUBLIC SERVICE AND THE STAGE.

By Andrea M. Couture

As New York City's elected public advocate since 2019, Brooklyn native Jumaane Williams is the ombudsman for more than 8 million people in all five boroughs, charged with overseeing city agencies and investigating citizen complaints. And, starting in 2016, when he was a member of the New York City Council, he has performed in more than 40 staged readings of plays, most of them classical tragedies, with Theater of War Productions.

Theater

Starting in 2009 with a performance of scenes from "Ajax" and "Philoctetes" by Sophocles that highlighted the issue of military PTSD, Theater of War Productions has presented dramatic readings of classical Greek tragedies and other plays followed by guided discussions linking their themes to contemporary social issues. It now has a repertory of more than 20 works

Jumaane Williams (center) leads a silent March for Black Lives across the Brooklyn Bridge in June 2020 / Shutterstock / Kevin RC Wilson

addressing a wide range of complex social issues—from racism to refugees, gun violence to sexual assault, front-line medical worker mental health to criminal justice, and more. Essential to the experience are post-performance discussions in which audiences engage with the play's themes, creating cathartic release and deepening understanding. During the pandemic, Theater of War has gone online, reaching a vast international audience.

Andrea Couture: You've been a community organizer, done affordable housing work, been a city council member, and now serve as public advocate. Why have you added acting to the mix?

Jumaane Williams: Being the public advocate is a big responsibility, which I take very seriously, dedicating as much time as humanly possible. But acting has always been my first love, what I dreamed about as a kid. I went to Harlem School of the Arts and planned to major in theater at Brooklyn College, but went into film production, and ultimately majored in political science.

Theater is an awesome mix of the things I love. It examines all the great issues and presents them for people to think about. I love acting, and just as athletes have taken stands on civil rights, it provides me with a platform that I didn't have in the 1990s when I had a few bit parts, cameos, and was typecast in some videos and commercials. That's why I had wanted to make my own films—to change the narrative.

You are one of more than 200 actors who have worked with Theater of War Productions, including Academy Award winner Frances McDormand and Bill Murray. Does acting help you in your public service? Theater of War is simply amazing! Two days after Frances McDormand won the Academy Award, we performed together! [I first became involved] because Linda Johnson at the Brooklyn Public Library and Bryan Doerries at Theater of War wanted to have a conversation about gun violence. I was on the New York City Council at the time and known to be very involved in that issue. So they reached out to partner and promote, and I said, "Hey, I'm an actor!" It's been an amazing journey. Very therapeutic for me and a way to continue in my art. I understand how it's the same skill set that's transferable from art to public life.

The oldest Greek theaters were adjacent to temples, and performances were linked with religious ceremonies. Do you see a connection between religion and theater—between today's church/synagogue/mosque and the ancient proscenium? Does your Baptist Christian faith intersect with your participation in Theater of War? My church, St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, has a *Maafa* [commemoration] every year, an African Holocaust observance of the crossing from Africa to America, a two-to-three-hour production. I've done it three times straight. Again, it's that same skill set. You get outside of yourself and enter another state. I'm more spiritual than religious, but I find some meaning and direction to get through like other people do when they come to a church of whatever kind.

You were diagnosed as a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Tourette syndrome and have been an outspoken advocate for people with those conditions. As a city council member you helped pass legislation to create an inspector general for the New York Police Department. You protested the detention of an immigrant rights activist at his regular check-in with ICE. How do your Christian beliefs influence your personal views and political positions? When I'm acting my Tourette symptoms disappear. The plays elicit a conversation about what is real life. **cont'd on page 45**

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"THE PLAYS ELICIT A CONVERSATION ABOUT WHAT IS REAL LIFE."

 (Clockwise) Jumaane Williams, Oscar Isaac, David Strathairn, and Frances McDormand perform online for Theater of War Productions.

PETITE MAMAN AND THE SACRED EVERYDAY

By Abby Olcese

Over the last year we've had to reconsider our definition of what makes a "sacred space." When churches and temples closed due to the pandemic, our homes became places of worship for many of us.

This cemented what's always been true: Sacred space is a fluid thing. It can be a place of deep personal meaning or shared memories with people we care about. A sacred space doesn't even need to be a physical location. It could also be the spiritual space created whenever we're with those we love or remember people we've lost.

Céline Sciamma's tender film *Petite Maman* speaks to this. A little girl, Nelly (Joséphine Sanz) and her mother, Marion (Nina Meurisse), grieve the death of Marion's mother and clean out Marion's childhood home. Sciamma's movie becomes a meditation on everyday sacred spaces, including those that can exist within mother-daughter relationships.

After her grandmother dies, 8-year-old Nelly accompanies Marion to the house to prepare it to sell. Grief quickly overwhelms Marion, who abruptly departs, leaving Nelly and her dad (Stéphane Varupenne) to finish up. While exploring the nearby woods, Nelly meets a little girl, also named Marion (Gabrielle Sanz), who strongly resembles Nelly. When Marion invites Nelly over for lunch, Nelly realizes that her new friend is her mother as a child, and the woman serving them is her grandmother.

As Nelly navigates the past and present versions of her mother's home, Sciamma shows us subtle details of how the house has evolved. The wallpaper changes. Toys and pieces of decor are switched out or put away. Nelly regards all of it with quiet curiosity as she interacts with places, objects, and events that before she only knew from her mother's stories.

The house and the memories it holds are precious to Nelly and Marion. So is their relationship, with the chemistry strengthened by casting Joséphine and Gabrielle Sanz, real-life sisters, in those roles. Sciamma uses natural lighting and warm, autumnal tones that feel both sentimental and unvarnished—a metaphor for how spiritual encounters or cherished memories can feel fleeting or incredible, yet rooted in truth.

At 72 minutes, *Petite Maman* is more a poem than a film, a brief glimpse into a pivotal moment in its characters' lives. Sciamma's exploration of memory, space, and relationship communicates the sacred present in the mundane, in ways we don't often notice until they're gone. The film suggests that if we look at experiences and people in our lives more expansively, we can be fully present in those hallowed moments. ⊗

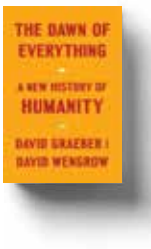
Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.

From *Petite Maman*

SHIFTING IDENTITY

Adapted from Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing* explores a Harlem Renaissance-era relationship between two reunited childhood friends, one of whom now passes as white while the other lives as a Black woman. The black-and-white film, which debuted at Sundance, moved to Netflix on Nov. 10.

Picture Films



Prehistory, Reimagined
Published after anthropologist and anarchist activist David Graeber's death, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* overturns our understanding of our ancestral past. Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow link our ideas of hunter-gatherers and early cities to anti-Indigenous 18th century narratives.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Dismantling Prisons
In *Brick by Brick: How We Build a World Without Prisons*, Cradle Community, an activist collective dedicated to transformative justice and prison abolition, challenges common concepts of criminality and punishment and recognizes the harmful consequences of these ideas within and beyond the prison industrial complex.
Hajar Press

WHAT WE REALLY LOVE

By Faith-Marie Zamblé

Curated

The Met Gala is fascinating. Part chaos and part fundraiser, the Gala has created a treasure trove of cultural touchstones and meme-worthy content over the past few years. Created in the 1940s to benefit the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, the Gala is, at its core, a paean to the sartorial arts. In many ways, it's the gift that keeps on giving, especially if you, like me, are not opposed to a lot of pomp and very little circumstance. However, in the thick of my 2 a.m. behind-the-scenes-at-the-Met video binge, a thought occurred to me that I've been turning over ever since: America may not have bread, but it sure has circuses.

Media theorist Neil Postman said as much—far more eloquently—in his prescient 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Decades after the book's publication, I still find its message chilling. Postman's thesis is that the technology and spectacles we love, rather than state oppression, will lead to our downfall. As a Black person in this country, I know both options are possible, but in terms of our media addiction, Postman's got us pegged. I worry often about corporations buying our attention and the political implications of who we're told to sympathize with or listen to. Algorithms and endless queues of "related videos" were not made to encourage human flourishing, but rather to benefit shameless tech companies and their investors.

* * *

AMERICA MAY NOT HAVE BREAD, BUT IT SURE HAS CIRCUSES.

Watching *Vogue*'s coverage of the Met Gala, I realized that I was being manipulated. Not in an overtly malicious way; more in the all too familiar, "Hey, these beautiful wealthy people are just like you!" way. It's a fantasy that keeps everyone too dazzled to see the social dynamic for what it is—aristocracy in the 21st century. As a cloud of assistants glued gems on a pop star's nails or sewed dress hems on hands and knees, unease crept in. As much as I love the fantastic dresses and the stylistic risk-taking, the Gala felt like a potent reminder that we do not all live in the same reality, and that very little of this glamour is truly meaningful.

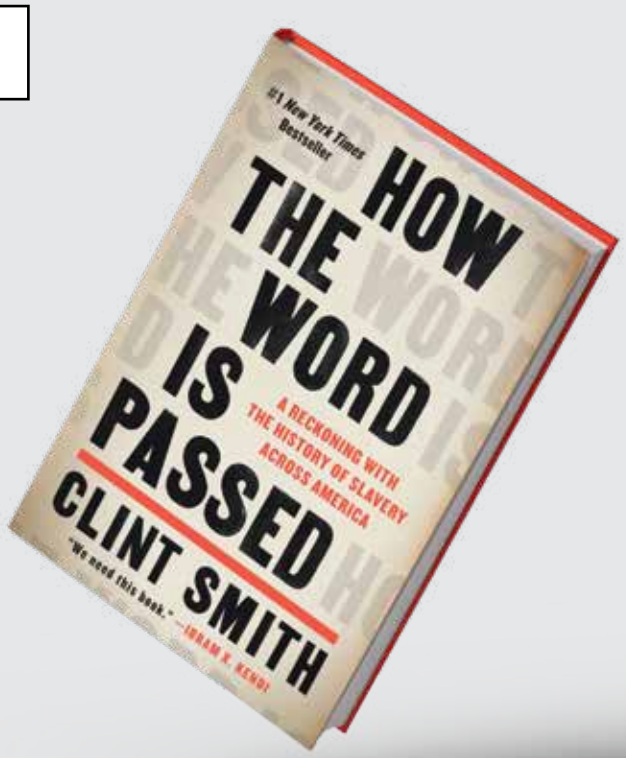
I'm aware that YouTube videos (or Instagram posts) at 2 a.m. are not everyone's vice. But, if it's not celebrity drama, it might be the news cycle or email. Managing attention in a time like this can be incredibly difficult. It's not just that we're being primed by our phones to lap up the content it curates for us. It's that life is getting more complicated and exhausting for most people. While a little escapism is necessary, the escape offered by our phones doesn't ultimately offer a holistic or life-giving solution.

How do we cultivate practices of attention that mirror the values we hold dear in a world that is constantly trying to distract? I don't know. But a few days ago, one of my plants surprised me with a new leaf, and the joy I felt was far greater than any aimless clicking on social media. Maybe, it can be that simple: Tuning in to what is real and in front of us. Sitting in the present. Sinking into what we really love, instead of what's available. And, most important, avoiding YouTube after midnight.

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an artist, writer, and M.F.A. candidate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the Yale School of Drama.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez attends the Met Gala 2021 / Kevin Mazur / Getty Images for the Met museum / *Vogue*

Books



REMEMBERING SLAVERY'S WOUND

How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America, by Clint Smith

Little, Brown and Company

The Statue of Liberty, author Clint Smith tells us, was supposed to celebrate the abolition of slavery. Early models depicted the iconic copper lady holding a raised torch in one hand and a pair of broken shackles in the other, but the final version included only a piece of broken chain at the lady's feet. With slavery shifted to the periphery, Ellis Island's visitors could imagine liberty was, and is, possible without abolition.

In *How the Word Is Passed*, Smith visits multiple historic sites to offer a mosaic portrait of how different places tell, or do not tell, the truth about slavery. The book meditates on the capacity of our collective symbolic infrastructure to prepare us to rectify persistent material inequalities. If we frame slavery as something that "happened a long time ago" or leave unchallenged the warping of the Confederate commitment to enslavement into myths of honor and heritage—if, in a word, we misremember the wound—then we will not summon the will nor the proper know-how to heal it.

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IF WE MISREMEMBER THE WOUND, WE WILL NOT SUMMON THE WILL TO HEAL IT.

Smith allows people and places to speak for themselves, supplying context and offering occasional questions. A poet, he draws natural beauty out of otherwise painful landscapes: Dragonflies in a cemetery marked "our confederate heroes" remind us that the violent past is near—that perhaps the ancestors of these same dragonflies "zipp[ed] past the bullets that turned men into ghosts, their wings warm with beads of blood."

Smith's best chapters are about sites that offer a more complete and accurate history, such as Louisiana's Whitney Plantation and Senegal's Gorée Island, a gateway to the middle passage. Here Smith pursues that thorny question that runs parallel to the endeavor to heal our collective memory: Who is culpable, then and today?

Many white people and churches defend themselves when confronted with the history of slavery, either by asking, as the director of the Whitney reports, about the existence of "good" slave owners or, alternatively, by announcing, "This history is awful" and "they were the bad guys." Both responses amount to attempts to preserve the possibility of one's own goodness, either by alignment with a tradition of redemption or distance from a pattern of villainy. More politically progressive Christians often capitulate to both temptations: "We are the sort of church that welcomes all people and names evil," we say, "not like those other churches, past and present."

Smith is clear that some people bore more blame than others. But he also praises a Senegalese schoolteacher, Hasan, who says, "It's important to go beyond this view of victims and perpetrators"—both because the oppressed were not defined by their pain and because poor white folks also participated in the evils of slavery. And as the director of the Whitney explains, once slavery enabled goods like sugar and cheap textiles to flood the European market, "people [could] finally buy into this larger system of capitalism and consumption." Satiating consumer appetites perpetuated slavery.

Today, too, so much pleasure depends on exploiting others. Smith's book is no sermon, religious or otherwise. But it invites readers not only to repair the infrastructure that misremembers slavery, but the systems and desires built on ongoing suffering and oppression. ⊗

Ryan Stewart (@RyanMcStew) is a teacher in Springfield, Mass.

NO PRESUMPTION OF UNITY

How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace, by Melissa Florer-Bixler

Herald Press

The work of peacemaking has been long beset by the stereotypes of it being "nice" work, polite to the point of being inoffensive. In her new book, Melissa Florer-Bixler wants to disabuse us of the idea that making peace means having no enemies. If anything, as she argues, Christians should have enemies *well*. Having enemies does not mean that the Christian who pursues justice incurs the resentment of others, but that their witness is direct, pointed, and takes sides.

The church, she writes, is "not to unify as a way to negate difference or to overcome political commitments," but to sharpen those disagreements between the gospel and the world, particularly where reconciliation conceals power inequities. It does no one any favors, she suggests, to resolve moral disagreements within the church in a way that "disregards how coercion and force shape the lives of enemies."

For churches to engage in political struggles, rather than pretending to be apolitical, they must begin by naming their enemies: those who participate in the oppression of those on the margins of society, both inside and outside the church. For the church to live into its vocation of exemplifying the reign of God in its practices, commitments, and advocacy, it cannot begin from the presumption of unity, but of honesty, recognizing and naming how the church's call to the margins and the moral lives of its congregants (and of the world) diverge.

Florer-Bixler calls the church to have a shared anger that gives voice to the marginalized and calls the powerful to account through liturgy and through action. Only when we work for the tables of injustice within the church to be overturned—when we are willing to have enemies well—will Christians be able to clearly claim the mantle of Mary's Magnificat, or sing the songs of the martyrs in Revelation.

In her provocative work, it remains unclear whether people can convert to the way of Jesus within the church she describes here or if they could only join *after* they convert to this vision. A strong (and right) emphasis is put on the priority of the weak within the congregation. But if the church is known by its moral commitments, its commitment to the gospel of God's reign, what is to be made of those who, like Nicodemus at midnight, have not yet counted the cost? Does this vision, in articulating so strongly the need for the church to have a purified internal vision, become a new kind of sectarian peace church?

* * *

THEIR WITNESS IS DIRECT, POINTED, AND TAKES SIDES.

This is not an appeal for quietism or half-measures: Florer-Bixler is absolutely correct to call the church to name its commitments more clearly. But my question is whether this vision has the curiosity necessary to also ask the uncommitted, "how do you read this?" (Luke 10:26), so that they might see how to join in—or if more emboldened anger against injustice is all that is needed. ⊗

Myles Werntz is an associate professor of theology and director of Baptist studies at Abilene Christian University.

cont'd from page 40 But the discussion becomes easier and more honest because we're talking about what happened thousands of years ago and that then becomes connected to what's going on now.

My faith very much guides what I do. We must have justice and equality for all people. I'm clear about not having my personal views control other people's rights—that must be protected. We must have harmony with others. If what I've been thinking doesn't measure up to that, it has to be rethought and adjusted. That's the totality of my experience and one of the reasons I keep honest about my Tourette's and am upfront with people about what I'm thinking and doing. Because conversations behind closed doors are not protective of people—at least as far as I can determine. And my faith is a big part of that as well.

There is a theory that ancient theater originated as catharsis for veterans of war. The Theater of War's guided, thematic post-performance discussions are intrinsic to its mission. Among the post-performance comments you have heard—from mothers who have lost children to police violence, frontline medical workers during the COVID pandemic, and others—what struck you most? [Discussion] is included in every Theater of War performance to create a space to express thoughts stimulated by these tragedies and to have people bear witness. Plays have elicited emotion and torn down guards consistently for thousands of years, erasing differences among people regardless of gender, race, economics, power. ⊗

Andrea M. Couture lives in New York City. She has had two careers—working on domestic and international social issues, and the arts—and delights in combining them.

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Rev. Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners and author of *A More Perfect Union: A New Vision for Building the Beloved Community*. He is recognized as a leader in addressing a range of peace and justice issues and can speak on global human rights, faith and politics, faith-inspired activism, racial and economic justice, and more. You can invite Adam to speak to your congregation, students, or co-workers at **sojo.net/AdamSpeak.**

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SOJOURNERS

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Jumaane Williams speaks at a memorial rally for Mohamed Bah, who was killed by police in New York City in 2012 / Shutterstock / Steve Sanchez

Poetry

DECLARATION

By D.S. Martin

Each word I choose
carries a different rucksack load for each of you
like I'm the fox slinking along rail lines
        thinking by instinct & appetite & you're
        the commuter passing through
like I'm the moon whose same beams call
        to a weeping child to a prowling owl
        to shivering rodents in the grass

To say anything of God sounds to those
wandering the fields ragged & churchless
like a grand declaration from some little clod
To paint beyond what's seen
of holy stars on a swirling canvas
is to touch ungraspable mysteries

Each flicker of light
from my hilltop fortress may be seen
quite differently from a distance
but that's up to you The cypress trees flame
Each fox & field mouse responds
to the light they're given scampers toward
the heights unburdened by whatever might
hinder them

D.S. Martin, author of *Angelicus*, is poet-in-residence at McMaster Divinity College and lives in Brampton, Ontario.

Illustration by Colleen Tighe

Discover your calling

Photo by Christian Smutherman

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SOJOURNERS

CROSS MARKS ON THE STABLE DOOR

Scripture passages are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle C

By Isaac S. Villegas

Living the Word

On Sufjan Stevens' 2012 Christmas album, *Silver & Gold*, he includes "Ah Holy Jesus," a hymn about Christ's crucifixion. Stevens sings: "For me, kind Jesus, was thine incarnation / thy mortal sorrow, and thy life's oblation / thy death of anguish and thy bitter passion / for my salvation." The cross on Golgotha casts a long shadow toward Bethlehem. When the child in the manger grows into adulthood, our world kills him. The story of the incarnation is the story of crucifixion.

For Stevens to sing such a hymn during this season reminds us that Jesus was born into an anguished world—an anguish that took hold in his life, an agony unto death. "The whole life of Jesus comes under the heading 'suffered,'" theologian Karl Barth commented. "For the evangelists Luke and Matthew, the childhood of Jesus, his birth in the stable of Bethlehem, were already under the sign of suffering," Barth continued. "The entire life of Jesus is lived ... in the shadow of the cross."

Jesus didn't offer salvation as an escape plan from our life's travails but as a commitment to heal us from the habits of sin, the violence that cuts through each of us and the world. Christmas Day doesn't redeem our wounded world in an instant—as if the old order vanishes with the newborn's first cry. Instead, Jesus undergoes a human life and entrusts our lives to the Holy Spirit's care.

Salvation is a salve, the soothing presence of the Spirit. This same Comforter took care of Mary at Jesus' birth and ministered to him during his passion. "For me, kind Jesus, was thine incarnation ... and thy life's oblation."

Isaac S. Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill (N.C.) Mennonite Fellowship and president of the governing board of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

* * *

MARY'S MAGNIFICAT IS WHAT GOD'S HEARTBEAT SOUNDS LIKE AS THE WAITING DRAWS TO A CLOSE.

DECEMBER 5

PREPARE THE WAY

MALACHI 3:1-4; LUKE 1:68-79; PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11; LUKE 3:1-6

A spirituality of discipleship is an important theme in our Christian tradition. We practice *imitatio Christi*, conforming ourselves to Jesus. In this, Jesus becomes the model for our ethics, a way of life devoted to God. As a member of the Mennonite Church, I'm at home in this Anabaptist vision for Christian existence. "We cannot know Christ unless we follow him daily in life," said Hans Denck, a 16th century German Anabaptist leader.

In Luke's gospel, John the Baptizer invites us into a different posture in relation to Jesus, not to see ourselves as "little Christs," or as reincarnations of Jesus, but to look to John as our exemplar. John is the witness. He is a sign that points to what's emerging. John offers the baptism of repentance as a ritual of preparation to ready the people for the advent of the Messiah. As the prophet Malachi foretold, "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me" (Malachi 3:1). John is the harbinger of the coming of the Lord. The author of Luke's gospel quotes from the book of Isaiah to describe John's ministry. John is the "voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (Luke 3:4).

We are like John. As a collective body, the church incarnates an announcement of the gospel. Congregations exist as communal proclamations of Christ's advent. We bear witness to Jesus' arrival in the world as we sing hymns and read our scriptures. We pray for each other and preach the good news—all our worship is a cry in the wilderness, to make a way for the mysteries of God among us.

Illustration by Matt Chinworth

DECEMBER 12

CHAFF AND WHEAT

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20; ISAIAH 12:2-6; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7; LUKE 3:7-18

"What then should we do?" (Luke 3:10) the crowd demands of John the Baptist after he yells at them from the riverside, calling them to repentance and cleansing in preparation for the Messiah. "You brood of vipers!" John shouts. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!" (verses 7-8).

John stuns the crowd—his prophetic zeal, intensity, and devotion to God's righteousness shock the people gathered at the Jordan. John announces imminent judgment: "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (verse 9).

During Advent *we* are in the crowd along the river. John's words crash through *our* lives. His pronouncements batter *us* like waves of judgment and hope, one after the other. We are left baffled about what this Messiah will mean for our lives. In the company of soldiers and tax collectors, we too ask, "And we, what should we do?" (verses 12, 14). John's response centers on money, on the economics of grace, and on the redistribution of wealth and property. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none" (verse 11). "Do not extort money from anyone" (verse 14).

What then should we do? That's the question at the heart of Advent. We remember that humanity rejected Jesus upon his arrival. Will we be different this time? This world couldn't, *wouldn't*, bear his life of love—a divine love that trembled the foundations of life. Jesus confronts us with the possibility of a world reborn, of being set free from sin. If we are to prepare for the new life Christ offers, then it will involve a threshing. As John says, we must separate chaff from wheat in our lives.

DECEMBER 19

FULLNESS OF TIME

MICAH 5:2-5; PSALM 80:1-7; HEBREWS 10:5-10; LUKE 1:39-55

One of the mysteries of Advent is timing: Why was Jesus born at that particular moment in history? And why Mary? The Advent stories are full of bewilderment. Mary asks the angel Gabriel, "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34). When Elizabeth sees the pregnant Mary, she asks, "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (verse 43).

The best explanations come from theologians who admit ignorance. We have no idea why God chose that time and place for the incarnation, other than that's when God decided to do what God did. Thomas Aquinas writes in his 13th century *Summa Theologica* that Jesus was born in first-century Palestine because it was *convenientia* (fitting). The "fittingness" of Advent, because that was the timing that seemed right to God. The apostle Paul makes a similar theological point: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4).

The fullness of time. Think of God, waiting century after century, overwhelmed with longing to draw closer to human beings—closer to you and me. During God's long wait, love expanded in God's heart, stretching to the point of bursting. Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) is what God's heartbeat sounds like as the waiting draws to a close. Words bubble up from within her. Mary's song is God's tiny heartbeat translated into human language as prophecy. Mary proclaims what the advent of God's love in the flesh will do in our world: the powerful cast down from their thrones, and the lowly lifted up; the hungry filled with good things, and the rich sent away empty (verses 49-55).

* * *

DISCIPLESHIP IS A COMMITMENT TO BECOME DEEPLY HUMAN.

DECEMBER 26

FULLY HUMAN

1 SAMUEL 2:18-20, 26; PSALM 148; COLOSSIANS 3:12-17; LUKE 2:41-52

Following Mary's delivery of Jesus in that Bethlehem stable, after the startling reality of God as a swaddled infant, after the astonishment of Christmas Day, then everyone returns to their routine. Joseph and Mary will dedicate years of daily rituals for the care of this child.

The biblical accounts of Jesus' life pass silently over his childhood and adolescence. Luke's gospel gives hints: "The child grew and became strong in spirit," (Luke 1:80). The next chapter repeats the statement: "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom" (Luke 2:40). And again: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years" (Luke 2:52). He grew and grew. Over the years Jesus learned the feel of time on his skin, the way growing pains feel in the body. He learned to become part of this world; how to love and how to mourn.

Imitatio Christi. To be like Jesus is to be human. According to the Chalcedonian Creed on the nature of Christ, Jesus was "fully human," like us in all things but sin. That doctrinal claim, religion and culture professor Peter Dula writes, "makes us wonder, or should, if we are human." Discipleship is a commitment to become deeply human, to grow into the humanity of Jesus—the one whose life was filled with "the grace of God" (Luke 2:40). To grow in grace is to welcome every breath with gratitude, to recognize this world as a gift.

Christianity is a collective style of life where we grow in our likeness to Jesus; discipleship is our participation in the humanity of Christ. To believe in the incarnation is to bear witness to God's love for the world with our own lives and as a community. Discipleship is to become living signs of Christ—for God's love to become our human flesh. ⊗

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumphs

I KISSED DATING GOODBYE AND STARTED WASHING PEOPLE'S FEET WITH MY HAIR

By Jenna Barnett

As I write this, it has been 16 months since my last haircut—the last time I felt safe being partially restrained by a front-facing cape while a stranger hovered near my face with scissors. Needless to say, my hair is unruly and prematurely greying, but fear not, it is doing wonders for my love life. I have kissed dating goodbye and started washing people's feet with my hair. Because why walk a mile in someone's shoes when you could just take a good hard look at their calluses? If you can feel the tug of your hair between your partner's toes and not turn away in shame (or accidentally tickle them), what can't you accomplish together?

This method is not only pandemic-safe-ish, it's biblical. And it is much wiser to take intimacy advice from Mary of Bethany than Joshua Harris of Dayton, Ohio. In the gospel of John, Mary pours an expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wipes his feet with her hair. In the gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus himself calls being anointed, "A BEAUTIFUL THING" (the original Greek did not use all caps, but it should have).

Now, in Greco-Roman times, a person would likely use an expensive perfume known as nard, an amber-colored, intensely scented essential oil derived from a flowering plant akin to honeysuckle. For unknown reasons, designer perfume companies have not jumped at the opportunity to name their products "Nard, for Her" or "Nard, Pure Seduction" or "Nard, Scent of the Gods' (feet)."

If you don't have any nard or Chanel No. 5 on hand, don't panic. It is okay to substitute other household aromatics. I have used, for example, Febreze, Poo-Pourri, the warm, wet wax of a T.J. Maxx candle, and nondairy vanilla creamer. But don't get too loosey-goosey with it: Only use Axe body spray as an absolute last resort, and only if you spray it out of the canister and into an alabaster jar before foot application. In a pinch, use your tears. Tears are a biblically appropriate foot ointment and, in such a time as this, all too plentiful.

If you are feeling judgy about my choices, may I remind you that Judas Iscariot was also a total snob when Mary dried Jesus' feet with her hair. And Jesus, no doubt emboldened by the smell and smoothness of his feet, reprimanded Judas and praised Mary's faith.

So don't be a Judas, don't be a Joshua—be a Mary and watch your love life blossom. ⊗

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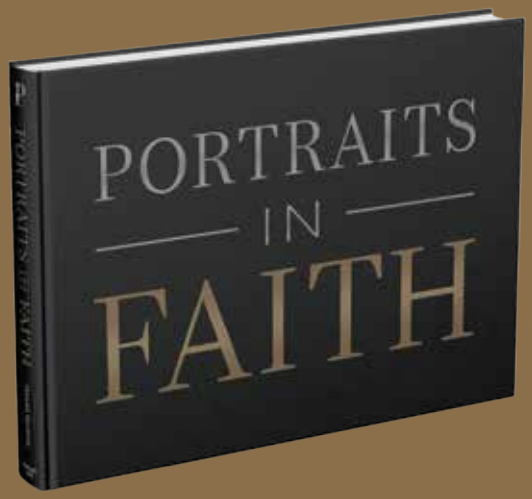
IF YOU DON'T HAVE ANY NARD OR CHANEL NO. 5 ON HAND, DON'T PANIC.

Jenna Barnett is associate culture editor, sojo.net.



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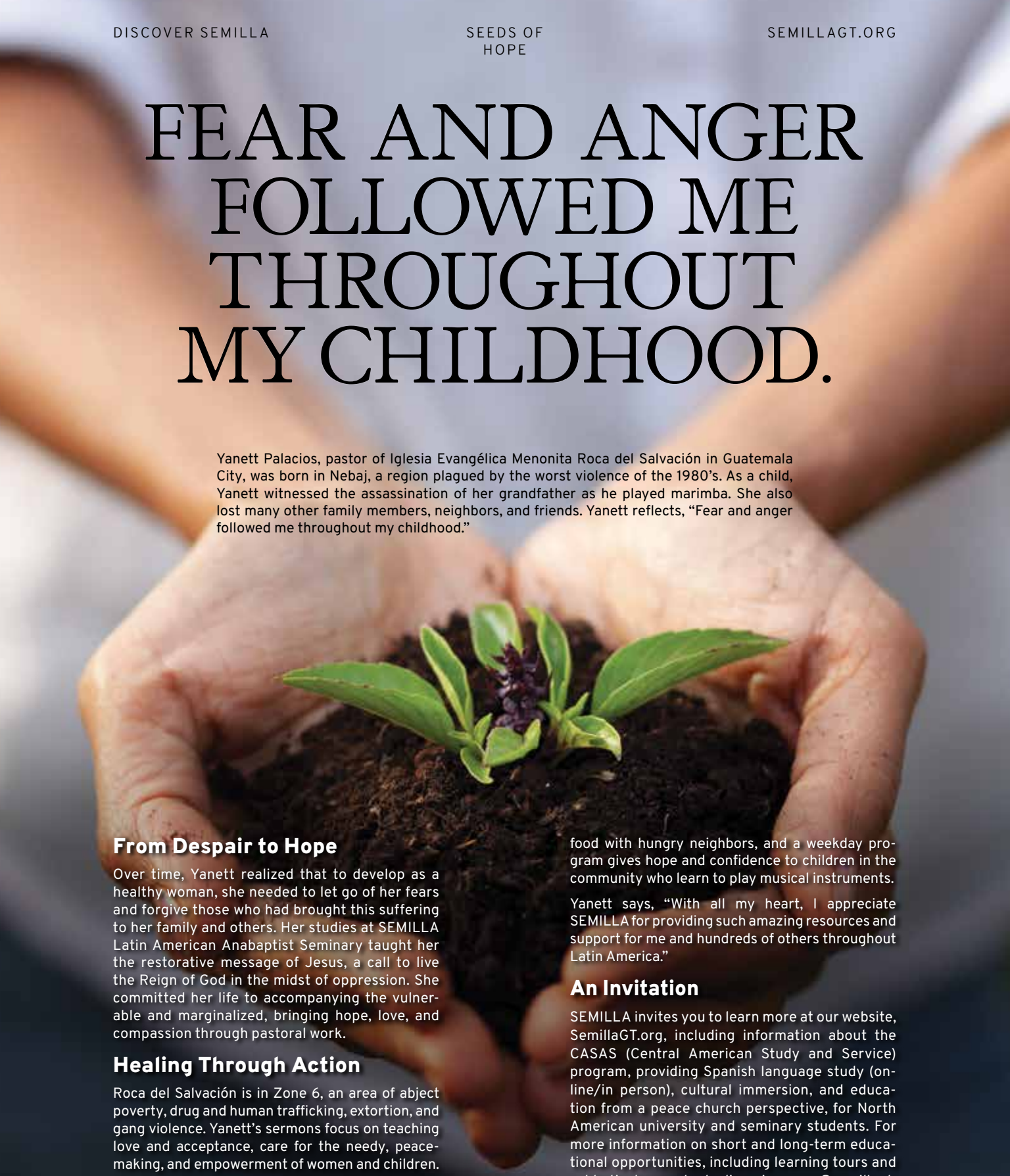
~ Brian D. McLaren, former pastor, author, activist

FEAR AND ANGER FOLLOWED ME THROUGHOUT MY CHILDHOOD.

Yanett Palacios, pastor of Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Roca del Salvación in Guatemala City, was born in Nebaj, a region plagued by the worst violence of the 1980's. As a child, Yanett witnessed the assassination of her grandfather as he played marimba. She also lost many other family members, neighbors, and friends. Yanett reflects, "Fear and anger followed me throughout my childhood."



From Despair to Hope

Over time, Yanett realized that to develop as a healthy woman, she needed to let go of her fears and forgive those who had brought this suffering to her family and others. Her studies at SEMILLA Latin American Anabaptist Seminary taught her the restorative message of Jesus, a call to live the Reign of God in the midst of oppression. She committed her life to accompanying the vulnerable and marginalized, bringing hope, love, and compassion through pastoral work.

Healing Through Action

Roca del Salvación is in Zone 6, an area of abject poverty, drug and human trafficking, extortion, and gang violence. Yanett's sermons focus on teaching love and acceptance, care for the needy, peacemaking, and empowerment of women and children. Sunday school teachers invite children from the nearby ravines for breakfast, church women share food with hungry neighbors, and a weekday program gives hope and confidence to children in the community who learn to play musical instruments.

Yanett says, "With all my heart, I appreciate SEMILLA for providing such amazing resources and support for me and hundreds of others throughout Latin America."

An Invitation

SEMILLA invites you to learn more at our website, SemillaGT.org, including information about the CASAS (Central American Study and Service) program, providing Spanish language study (online/in person), cultural immersion, and education from a peace church perspective, for North American university and seminary students. For more information on short and long-term educational opportunities, including learning tours and sabbaticals, contact direccioncasas@semillagt.org. God's shalom to you.

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